RETURN TO AMAZONIA

by

Joanne Carminhow

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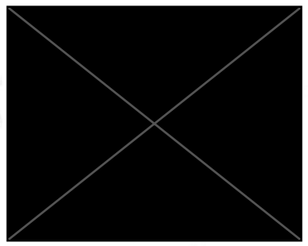
1990



## INTRODUCTION

I knew Josephine-Anne Seraphina Carminhow (Joanne for short) for forty years, from the day she joined me in the civil service in 1943, until her death in a road accident in France in January 1983. I can therefore testify to the accuracy of most of the material she retails. I figured more than somewhat in the original manuscript; these references have been expunged.

We started work at much the same time. I was in post for a month when Joanne turned up at the remarkably ugly mansion where we worked. Her cousin, Francoise, pre-dated me by a few weeks. We were drawn together by an invisible but powerful attraction. It was flattering to me to walk with (in film star terms) Senta Berger and Ann-Margaret. Indeed, had their blood-pride not militated against it, they could have done well as models.

Joanne does not spare herself in her story. She knew very well what she was, what she became. I knew she was not very nice, arrogant, free-wheeling, right-wing, living life in the fast lane and so forth. Yet to her friends she was not like this, she was loving and loyal. But she was class-ridden. Because my father was a Justice of the Peace I was accepted into her circle; others were treated cavalierly. I was always a close friend - when I was received into the Catholic church she stood as sponsor; I took that kindly. She taught me to ride; I was grateful. To be around her and not ride was unthinkable, for horses were her daily companions.

It was not really Joanne's fault, what she was, what she became. It was all down to her mother, the rather splendidly aristocratic, Felice Yolande Eugenie Carminhow, daughter of a Marquise, and proud of it. She was the motor of the household and when I was invited to be a house-guest (which was often) I merged in with their lifestyle as far as in me lay, even though it was foreign to me. Mrs.Carminhow brought up her daughters to be elegant but gallant, which is to say, morally loose. She enshrined the traditional sins of her kind and it was curious for me to see pre-Revolution decadence operating in the twentieth century. I could not help reflecting as I watched, and participated in, their parties, that their ancestress, Yolande, doubtless deserved her trip in the tumbril, as she operated a gaming hell. The Carminhow girls were brought up to venerate this deplorable woman, and so cannot be blamed for their sexual excess. It would not be far from the truth to say that the Carminhow ladies had too much money, too much leisure, and as a result they indulged their bodies to excess. Yet I loved them all.

To be fair to Joanne, she did have another side. She was bookish. I went with her to historical conferences, to record repositories, book sales and even spent days with her in cold vestries transcribing parish registers. She was a strange mixture; yet after the intellectual activity she was always anxious to slide between the sheets, for she swung wildly between lesbianism and heterosexuality. As you will read in these pages after one almost fatal derailment in London she got back on what was, to her, the rails of orthodoxy.

This volume contains her life in England. Her subsequent life in France, equally exciting, is to be found in volume 2.

THE EDITOR

26 High Street
ROBERTSBRIDGE
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## NOTE ON "DUNORLAN"

I wish Miss Carminhow had spent more time on the house known as "Dunorlan", which though monumentally ugly from the entrance side, where it abuts on what is now known as Pembury Road (which in the nineteenth century was known as Calverley Fairmile Road), was certainly not ugly from the south-facing side.

According to a sale catalogue of 1872 it was built at "enormous cost" in 1861 in the Italianate style, Normandy stone being used throughout. It was, as the catalogue states, "in every way adapted for the comfort and enjoyment of a nobleman or gentleman of fortune". It would certainly have needed a fortune to maintain it and because of this, perhaps, the owner (who was living at the time of the sale) had to sell.

The entire estate comprised 281 acres, including a six acre lake, and the usual appurtenances. It is sad that this grand mansion survived only for a century before being demolished. Built in 1861, during the 1939-1945 war it housed the War Damage Commission/Central Land Board, which subsequently moved back to London (to Spring Gardens near the Admiralty Arch) and "Dunorlan" came into the possession of the local authority. Soon after the mansion was razed, and the remainder of the land turned into a public park.

Photographs of the building are difficult to find. The local newspaper has only a photograph of the ugly entrance side and to find any representation of the house we have to turn to 19th century lithographs. It is sad that neither Miss Carminhow nor myself took the trouble to photograph the house when we worked there, but we were young and, after the nature of the young, unheeding. Such pictorial evidence that remains is owned by the Tunbridge Wells Art Gallery and Museum.

The fate of "Dunorlan" mirrors that of a much older house called Bayhall (the home of the Amhersts), of which a fine oil painting exists on the stairs of the Public Library at Tunbridge Wells. This mansion became a ruin, receiving its last significant mention in Charles G. Harper's "Haunted Houses" (Chapman & Hall 1907) and there was hardly enough left to then recognise.

"Dunorlan" was, as they said, "placed on an eminence" and possessed a tall tower which, apart from housing water tanks, also had rooms over. From this tower, as the sale catalogue says, "most charming panoramic views are available in all directions". In height it was probably as high as the campanile at Westminster Cathedral. During the war the tower was gutted by fire, as I well remember, and its height reduced by the placing of a flat roof in place of the ornate Italianate one.

Internally, as Miss Carminhow fairly says, it was over-decorated with gilt and red marble, and therefore, in modern judgement, tasteless. Yet this fault - if that it is - was typical of the nineteenth century. Even more modest homes were fussily decorated, with dust collecting hangings, and generally cluttered with bric-a-brac. It would be very easy to call "Dunorlan" a monstrosity and to welcome its destruction as an architectural nightmare. Yet as an example of its great period, it would be welcome today, a testament in stone of Victorian wealth and self-confidence. That the Borough Council thought fit to destroy it is sad, a judgement typical of our century just as extravagant adornment was of the Victorian age.

For us who spent our formative years in a relic of the past, that had grandeur and grace, it will always be a happy memory.



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I was home again, a well educated, poised, Catholic young lady. Had
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early feudal times. Yes, I was arrogant. I was also simmering
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armigerous descent, knew this very well, though daddy did not.

It had been a welcome home the night before and my delicious refugee
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It was quite Irish, but I hardly cared as long as we fed well.

The war was a bit of a cross to people like us. Before the war we
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I had just returned from my convent in Dublin, having completed my schooling. I and the Canonneses of St.Augustine had parted company for ever. Do not get me wrong. I was a good Catholic - not devout but punctilious in observance - and loved the Sisters, especially Sister Mary-Benedict who had taken me for History. She was a positive doll, small but with the merriest blue eyes you can imagine. But now I was home again, a well educated, poised, Catholic young lady. Had you seen me then you would have pinpointed me as a very cool (or 'laid back' as the phrase now is) arrogant young woman; and to be fair I had plenty to be arrogant about. I was beautiful, rich in my own right and a member of a family that had been noble since early early feudal times. Yes, I was arrogant. I was also simmering internally, agog for adventure. Mummy, a French lady of impeccable armigerous descent, knew this very well, though daddy did not.

It had been a welcome home the night before and my delicious refugee cousin, Francoise Yvette, had come down from Tunbridge Wells to see the girl that all the fuss was about. How mother got the goodies that were on the table (it being wartime) I do not know. I was soon to learn what money could do, the Black Market and daddy's many contacts. He was a solicitor and sometimes let a client pay in kind. It was quite Irish, but I hardly cared as long as we fed well.

The war was a bit of a cross to people like us. Before the war we had had a cook, and mummy had had a maid, and a gardener. We still had a gardener, but the maid had joined the A.T.S (to mummy's chagrin) and the cook had gone off to work in the local British Restaurant, despite the fact that daddy had offered to top anything the Government could offer. "No, Mr.Carminhow" she'd said firmly, "we've all got to do our bit for the war effort". Mother was aggrieved but had to turn her hand to household chores she had never expected to do again. But mummy did her bit too - she fire-watched at the local Telephone Exchange! But most of her spare time was taken up with the horses. We had always had horses, and ridden to the Hunt; but the war had put an end to the Hunt. We did employ a village girl as groom but mummy had to supervise.

The evening following the party was mummy's evening for fire-watching and so it left Francoise and I without female companionship. Like young maids are apt to do, we had giggled while out riding that day discussing what life held for us, which seemed exciting. We had passed some village girls while out riding and they had stood aside for us, looking up shyly at the two well turned-out young ladies. After we had passed, Francoise said gravely: "Is it not strange, Joanne, how omnipotent one feels when in the saddle?". I smiled in youthful arrogance: "Our class has always been in the saddle, and I pray God always will be. We were the mounted class always". Fran smiled at me in love, searching around for English words to express her feelings, and failing, closed her hand over mine, squeezing tenderly. I understood well what the pressure meant.

After tea, then, Francoise asked, in her laborious English, deliciously accented: "Could we not walk down into the village of which I have heard so much?".

"Oh yes, daddy, can we?".

My father looked up, slightly appalled, and clearly thinking of his offspring's maidenhead. "Not on your own you cant. But I need a walk. I will come with you".

Daddy was tall and spare, and during the day wore a wing-collar, like a lot of elderly solicitors of the period. He looked forbidding but was actually a very warm man, and a good father. On the other hand, I knew never to cross him. He was a father of the old school and despite my sixteen years would not have hesitated to put me across his knee for a good smacking if he deemed it necessary. Women, and girls especially had to be kept in their due and proper place. So I was docile. "Very well, daddy". Over his shoulder, as he rose, Francoise gave a small pout and a very expressive grimace. I warned her, finger on lips, to be silent.

So we walked to the village, locking our substantial 15th century house behind us. We made our way down the long drive to the main road and thus to the village. We were not terribly popular in the village. I was not popular, ever. "She thinks too bloody much of herself" was a judgement reported to me. Mummy, up to the outbreak of war, had been well aware of, and perpetuated, the social differences between us and the village people, but one day, soon after I returned home, she confided to me in genuine surprise: "You know, darling, I find the village women not too bad really. Not in our set of course, but not too bad". I bit my lip to hide a smile. "Do you really, mummy?". She thought for a moment, dark head slightly on one side. "Yes, I have been astonished. But they are terribly Socialist". Anybody who was not a Conservative was a Socialist to mummy, but I adored her. Her attitudes were coloured by our fiscal position of course.

Anyway, on this evening we walked to the village. Daddy walked in front, we two girls behind, hand in hand as daddy could not see us. We were safe enough, I knew, for he was wrestling with a legal problem. Both Fran and I (have you guessed?) were gay, though the term was unknown then; or rather, to be strictly factual, we were what they call AC/DC in these days. We had recognised it immediately we had met, and that afternoon had sunk together in the hay, investigating each other happily. Daddy, at that time, was unaware of our bodily needs. Mummy knew with a woman's instinct. She sighed but smiled. Perhaps she had foreseen it. The ladies of her family had always had a tendency that way.

As we approached the Post Office that night we heard a most awful noise. A big fist was hammering on the Post Office door. Attached to it was a man in an Army greatcoat with a tin hat cocked on the very back of his head. From his mouth came a torrent of words in the hard accent of the Six Counties. He was known in the village as the man from Derry.

We stood there for some minutes watching the Home Guard sergeant raising tandem and tallywack on the Post Office. My father made suitably risible comments, to the effect that he was making enough din to rouse the ghost of William III. It was not a good gambit to make to an Orangeman, especially as it was made in the soft accent of Eire. Avoiding his glare we stared ostentatiously at the darkening sky, watching searchlights making their pretty criss-cross pattern in the sky.

His hand having achieved nothing, an Army issue boot was aimed unerringly and flashed outward. The brown-painted door danced on its hinges but did not yield. The village craftsman who had made it might have been proud of his handiwork. And above it all, the stentorian snores of the postmaster could be heard above our heads.



"A heavy sleeper" daddy hazarded, receiving a dark look for his pains. There was another savage kick.

It was just at that moment that, opposite to where we stood, a window opened and an old man in a nightcap popped his head out. Francoise giggled, then placed her little hand over her mouth. In tones of outraged respectability came the enquiry: "Do you require the civilian population out?".

Irish did not so much as turn round. "No" he roared, "you bloody well go back to bed".

The old man slammed his window down and the sleeper above choked on a snore.

"Glory be! He's woken him up. Bless his woolly bedsocks!".

Wiping his brow, Irish stepped back into the road, looking up. A window was raised lethargically and a tousled head head appeared. It enquired what the matter was.

Big boots coughed ostentatiously. "Is it yerself Postmaster? I thought you were dead entirely". The sarcasm could have been cut with a knife and sold in unrationed portions over the counter.

"What's the fuss anyhow?" was the gruff response.

"Fuss is it? I'll tell you what it is. There's been an air raid for the past fifteen minutes, and headquarters says will you put the damned siren on".

"Why didn't you say so afore?". Before the sergeant could think of a suitable retort, the window was shut.

We girls looked on, wide of eye; Francoise, due to her imperfect English, missed some of the nuances but had got the gist.

A big, bony hand gripped daddy's arm. "Did you hear that?" came an awed whisper, "did you hear the effrontery of it? Its myself has stood here for the past quarter of an hour....." - he choked - "its murder so it is. And its cold enough.....".

We never heard what it was as cold as, for the wails of the siren rose high and shrill nearby. As it died away, all Hell broke loose. The anti-aircraft guns down the valley belched death and a lone Heinkel (so daddy said), caught in a searchlight beam, dived for safety.

An Irish voice yelled: "On your faces. He'll be letting go his load in a minute".

We didn't need telling twice. We touched the pavement at least three inches in front of the man from Derry. Fran and I lay, arms around each other. We were both frightened but stoutly refused to let it show. Our hair united in riotous confusion as our lips met in mutual comfort. "You are very beautiful, my cousin" she whispered, and I responded eagerly. Within seconds we might be together in Paradise but if we had to die, we wanted to face death in each other's arms. Even today Fran gets very emotional when I speak of it, and so do I.

Behind us came running footsteps. The Air Raid Warden hit the ground beside us. "All go, aint it?" he panted.

The Heinkel let go his load as he came up the valley. The crumps came progressively nearer. Francoise said an Ave, and we both signed ourselves. "If he drops another" muttered the Warden between clenched teeth, "we're mutton".

"Tell he's a butcher, can't you?" growled the Home Guard.

The Warden was wrong, but near enough right to take away any appetite for war (and some females, at this time, because they did not have to fight, did feel there was glory in war, which there is not). The final bomb dropped on the outskirts of the village. Certain things followed naturally on the explosion.

First, there was the sound of flying glass. Second, there was a loud and agonised moo from a cow. Third, more serious, the church bells started to ring; and since the church boasted a peal of eight bells, the clamour was something to hear.

The sergeant was on his knees first. "God help us!" he croaked, "that's the sign for invasion, so it is.....".

"Don't be daft, man. Its obvious what's happened. The bomb dropped near the church, and the vibration set the bells ringing, and frightened a cow. Its as plain as the nose on my.....on your face". The Warden was irritable.

"Well, girls" daddy said, as we rose sheepishly to our feet, "it seems tonight is not our night to collect our harps!". I have never admired daddy's self-control so much as on that night.

We stood in embarrassed silence. Fran and I looked down at our shoes to see if they were scuffed. They weren't. Then Big Boots coughed: "Aint you got no homes to go to? Its me for bed; and I've a long way to go". The steel shod boots clumped away.

The only man to be really incensed about the whole business was Farmer Sid Blackman, who spent a good hour digging his cow out of a crater in Ten Acre Brook. It was dead of course, and that made him hopping mad. "That there Daffodil was a prize milker, she was. Bugar the war, I say". Then, turning to the grinning locals, he glowered: "Its alright for you lot. But I asks you. Who's going to pay me for last night's work. Bloody 'itler?".

That very night Francoise suggested I join her at the War Damage Commission in Tunbridge Wells. Working for a living had never occurred to me before, and I was not enamoured of it. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was rich, made so by my aunt who, dying in 1937, had left me a trust fund of £250,000 (as she had, in fact, my brother and sister likewise) which, well invested, brought me in a very nice income. I saw no good reason to work. But I saw daddy nod, and mummy said: "Well, you'll have to do something, darling. Being a civil servant isn't bad, is it, Francoise? And if you don't do anything our friends will talk".

"And I cannot quite see you as a Land Girl" daddy said drily, and everyone laughed. "Pushing paper around is an easy way of helping the war effort". So it was decided.

I was, of course, a very spoilt girl. I admit it frankly. But I resented the war greatly. In peace time I would have done the usual things for girls of my class - I would have groomed and worked our horses, hunted, ridden in point-to-points, giggled at smooth-cheeked young men fawning over me as I sat in my party dress and eventually fall' gracefully as a lady was taught to do. It had always been so in our family, mummy had said, and then went on to explain to me how wonderful it was to be taken by a man. I believed it! Girls in convents do not spend all their time at Mass, be it said. As much education occurs in the dormitory as in the classroom. The war would come between me and my normal lifestyle. It was this I resented. I didn't mind helping the war effort if it could be done without too much hardship. Yes, I was spoilt and in fact needed a good spanking. But working as a civil servant was the best thing I ever did. I continue to bless Francoise for her suggestion. In any event, I wrote off for an interview for a job as Temporary Clerk.



My interview was with the Regional Manager, a Major Eric Resher. Let me describe Major Resher for you. He fitted so well the stereotype of the British Raj, then so beloved of Socialists, that I could not believe it. He was fat, florid and had a monacle screwed into his left eye.

Fran had giggled: "You'll have no bother, cherie. You're a beautiful girl. But keep your legs crossed!".

I had a soft southern Irish accent, with a cut glass overlay. People told me it was attractive. But I worried slightly, knowing full well there was prejudice against the Irish, as there still is, I am told. Daddy had been born in Dublin but had taken British nationality, and I had been born British. Still, I worried slightly and tried to iron out my slight brogue, without result. But my effect on Resher was quite remarkable.

Every girl gets looks from men as she grows up. Daddy's friends fell about when they saw me during my holidays. Conversation would die and I would get those strange, arch looks that said as print: "Corr!". It gives a girl confidence for she knows she will always get a meal ticket without difficulty. I loved being a girl. I loved the way they held doors open for me, how they deferred to me. But mummy was on hand to explain why it was done - not out of respect for my sex but out of a desire to drop anchor in my bay. It frightened me at first but as I grew older I was amused.

But Resher was something new. He rose as I entered his office and I plainly saw the movement in his loins. He sat down hastily, motioning me to do likewise. I was demureness itself, and I dutifully crossed my legs. I had taken infinite pains with myself. Not a hair was out of place but more importantly I had opened my jacket so that my womanly glory could be seen. I had tightened by belt also, so that my white silk blouse streaked away delightfully from my firm young bosoms.

French girls are brought up to be realistic about sex. Mummy was French and I was half-French. I knew about men and what pleased them. I knew they were bastards of course but I equally knew it was a man's world. I was not embarrassed by it, never was I a feminist. I knew what I had been given a lovely body for and was quite prepared to use it, within reason, to get what I wanted. In more recent years women trumpet that they are not and do not wish to be thought of as sex objects. This is folly. This is what a woman is all about. It is what makes the world go round.

Well, I got the job - but naturally. Men were at the war and the office (called "Dunorlan" by the way) was 90% female. I was immediately at home. There were many wives of servicemen but also a number of the morning-coffee-and-sex brigade doing their war work. There was, after all, a war on and a lady has to take her share of the heat and burden of the day!

The man Resher was a bully, everyone said so. There was one occasion when I stood before him, trembling. It was silly really. I had been given a letter to type (in my last year at the convent I had taken a secretarial course) and being a highly educated young woman I had addressed the letter not to 'Kingston-by-Sea' but to 'Kingston Buci', which was its historical name. When this went before Resher to sign he was madder than a wet hen. I was treated to such a brutal display of angry bluster that I started to cry. This seemed to make him worse, for he roared; and I sobbed.

Looking back on it I realise it was wounded pride, and I was much hurt for such a tirade was totally outside my experience. The nuns were

were ladies and when I had done wrong I was spoken to sharply and given a chore to do; and at home daddy had smacked me when I needed correction. Then, when very young, I would run to mummy, crying. She would kiss me and she would say to daddy: "Really, Harry! She's only a girl". And he would say firmly: "She has to know who's master" and retired to his study. Then, as I got older, if I transgressed I would be denied access to my horse. Now, that really did hurt. I loved my horse. But Resher was a swine. Nobody had ever spoken to me like that. But I had to face it - I was no longer in a protected environment, I was in the harsh world.

My distress was so palpable that his secretary, Margaret Stone, whose office was across the corridor, heard the ruckus and came to see what it was about. She led me away, giving me her handkerchief. She said he was often like this and that I must not mind him; that he was a pig, ex-Indian army. Then she made me laugh through my tears, saying he probably thought he was dressing down a remarkably pretty Second Lieutenant! At that I mentally preened and withdrew and re-made my face. But when I met Fran after work my eyes were still red. Francoise was learning English vernacular quickly. "The bastard!" she breathed. "Now, before the Revolution.....". We ended up giggling about getting a 'lettre de cachet' and putting him in the Bastille; but we agreed he was a coward to treat a girl so.

From that day on I hated him, and when Josephine-Anne Seraphina Carminhow hated a man, he assumed a Lilliputian smallness that makes him almost invisible. Thus, when I knew him to be watching Fran and I from his first floor window as we walked in the grounds at lunch-time, my disdain knew no bounds; and when I could 'cut him' in the office I did, but I feared him. I knew, as a lady always knows, that his interest in me was unwholesome, and when that bulk came near me I must confess to dread and an imp of fear stroked my heart-strings.

Subsequently he died of a heart attack, being followed by a man named Burton which gave the office wags a chance to say he had 'gone for a Burton'.

To do "Dunorlan" justice, it stood in its own grounds which boasted a large lake. This still exists, providing enjoyment for the citizens of Tunbridge Wells, although the house has long since been razed. So it is that post-Resher I look back on these days with a kind of pleasure. And I always had Francoise of course.

The work of the office was to register, investigate and pay claims for war damage, an onerous task since the south eastern region contained the counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, the most war-torn section of the country, outside London. It is not this that Francoise and I recall but the social organisation.

The able-bodied men were at the war and such men as there were either elderly, army rejects or young like myself. Most of the establishment were female, monied ladies doing their war work (as they esteemed it to be), emanating from that part of the town known as Mount Ephraim, an area which then approximated to Hampstead in the quality of its houses and social position of its inhabitants. Francoise and her mother lived there too. It has since, I understand, become less of a desirable location. These ladies interpreted the words 'war work' in a very liberal fashion indeed, and the few men the office boasted were not slow in improving the shining hour. I do not condemn; that is the nature of the male animal. I well remember how my innocence was shattered by coming across two naked bodies in the middle of an immense rhododendron growth in the grounds. Both Francoise and I were convent girls and we swung between giggling and shock.

That was not the only shock I had. My sister Sally returned from Ire-



land. I must tell you the truth about Sally and I. We hated each other. No, I do not overstate it. It was not sibling rivalry; it was sibling detestation. I know where the roots were - jealousy; and I must admit that Sally had good cause to be jealous. The youngest child is usually a favourite, and so it was with me. But it had all started when we were small, so much so indeed that we were sent to different convents in Dublin. Even that did not spare me Sally's enmity. One day, when our two teams met on the hockey field, her stick somehow - accidentally-for-the-purpose - struck my head and I lay down in a stupor and was carried off. She got into trouble for it, but she said it was worth it. That was how it was with us always. Above all the things she hated me for were my looks; not that Sally was plain, she wasn't, and she made a very good marriage, which was fruitful and happy. But she detested me.

If I had the pulchritude, Sally had the qualities I wished I had. She was a swot, academically brilliant; I was not. I was frivolous; she was serious. I had to beat boys off with a club; Sally's serious young face put boys off. I went to Mass when I had to; Sally was devout. I rode horse as if I had been born in the saddle; knowing which Sally hated horses. I was a right-wing Conservative; Sally called herself a Socialist - imagine it, a girl with a £250,000 trust fund calling herself a Socialist! Sexually she was straight as a ruler, with a great fear of God's wrath if she deviated an inch from the norm. And I liked laying with girls. This gave her a weapon to use against me always. "You lousy pervert" she hissed at me one day as we stood, breast to breast, in vicious female combat, "why should you have been given everything!". Why indeed; but it was not my fault. And when I smiled and murmured: "Lucky I guess" she boiled over. She slapped my face, I slapped hers and, little teeth bared, we went down tearing at each other. It was one of the few brutal cat-fights in my life. We might have damaged each other had not mummy pulled us apart.

"What am I to do with you two!" she asked in despair, near to tears, for she loved us. Daddy had more than a few words to say on the matter. There was a way out, as he knew well. "Francoise" says he, "has long wanted you to go and live with her in Tunbridge Wells. You will do that. I am not having this house turned into a battlefield". Then more kindly he added: "You may come home on Saturday afternoons and go back on Monday morning. I will drive you into Headcorn station myself".

Actually it worked very well. There was a lovely tall girl named Petra Amsden, who worked at the office. She, too, was a stunner but, alas, not of my persuasion. But I enjoyed her company; and two maids together kept the wolves at bay on the train.

The problem of Sally and I turned out to be not a problem at all. Sally pursued marriage with single-minded purpose, haunted by a natural fear of being an old maid. Anyway, a rising young architect in Sussex, not too far removed from us socially and a Catholic, saw Sally at a dance and very sensibly deciding that lovely girls were trouble and shallow-minded (which is possibly true) said 'the hard word' and they were married in January 1945, before she was twenty. "Quick work!" I murmured cattily. Daddy gave me a glance full of glacial inclemency: "Every normal girl wants to get married". I was silent.

It grated on Sally that mummy insisted on me being chief bridesmaid. You could almost see her gnashing her teeth. I naturally found malign pleasure in it. And at the reception the bridegroom's male friends made a bee-line for me. I was amused, as I watched them undressing me in their minds eye; a lady always knows what is in a

man's head. That doesn't take much wit, since there is only room in a man's head for one subject. Sally saw all this, heard my trill, and her face froze, but she had other things to do that day, to think of. But I enjoyed myself hugely. It is delicious for a young lady to fence with men and carry off the verbal honours; but it is strictly no contest really, ladies being superior in every department - except one maybe.

At the office the fun and games for the ladies were coming to an end. Here we were in 1945 and the end of the war. No longer did Francoise and I have to take our turn on the roof of the mansion with a handbell to warn our colleagues of the approach of V.1's. There was nothing one could do about the V.2 rockets. But it was all happening. The Boche were on the run; Montgomery had his moment of triumph on Luneburg Heath; Hitler and his wife, Eva Braun (who I always thought was a courageous woman, though I didn't say so to Francoise!) committad suicide; and there was V.E and V.J days to celebrate (that is to say, Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan). But coming on the heels of all this came the British General Election.

Naturally I worked for the Conservatives at the 1945 election; and my recently married, ever-hating sister worked for the Labour Party, which was a matter of shame within the family! To be honest, I worked myself ragged for my Party. The value of a well-endowed young woman on the hustings, and one who spoke so well, was apparent and so I was enlisted, being called "The Voice of Youth". It makes me cringe now but then I was very proud. I saw myself as Joan of Arc leading the charge at Orleans! In Tunbridge Wells Francoise could do little apart from addressing envelopes. That galled her. But for myself, I went in advance of the candidate as a warm-up speaker until he could reach the venue. My appearance alone got me a hearing from the male part of the audience but I got my share of cat-calls from women. More than once I heard myself called "Fascist cow!". Naturally, the worst question I had to face was Munich. I took the only view one could possibly take, and which has lately come into fashion - that Mr.Chamberlain was a gentleman and had bought us a vital year in which to re-arm. I was hissed, I was booed, but I stuck to my guns. I stood there, upright on my high heels, proudly facing the hostility of the Socialists. Then, one night my evil-minded sister started following me around from meeting to meeting, heckling me from the floor, waving a copy of Labour's "Let Us Face the Future", and getting all the cheers. I could have killed her, torn her face into ribbons. And this went on all through that bitter campaign. Some nights I could have burst into tears, but it was fatal to lose one's temper in public, and so I kept my murderous thoughts to myself. Mummy and daddy were proud of me and that helped.

Sally lived in East Sussex, in the Rye constituency, and she had organised an Election Night Party for the family. I did not want to go, for I had seen the vast empty spaces when Mr.Churchill spoke at Walthamstow Stadium and with my warrior's heart sinking I did not want to face my sister's jeers. It was unthinkable that the Conservatives should lose, but I dreaded it. I took it as a personal affront that the soldiers should turn against their leader. But daddy said: "You'll have to come. We cant disappoint Sally. I know my youngest daughter is a brave girl". He kissed me and I was of course lost.

So we went as a family to the count at Rye, and naturally the Conservative won. Well, it was Sussex! I was cheered by this, but Sally looked sour. Then, stopping at a cafe at, I think, Brede on the way to Sally's home, daddy asked the lady owner whether she'd heard who had won nationally. "Yes" she replied in angry disgust, "its a Labour government!". Sally clapped her hands delightedly, and I, being an emotional lady, wept. "How could they?" I sobbed, "how could they reject Mr.Churchill after all he's done for them?". Sally jeered, but mummy put her arm



around me consolingly: "Dont worry, cherie. They'll call us back after Labour has ruined the economy". And it was so.

I am afraid I did not behave very well at Sally's. It was pure nastiness, of which I am now ashamed. Someone said: "If you have it, flaunt it". I had it and I flaunted it. I sat opposite Sally's husband, David, and over the meal I hit him with everything I had - my smile, my bosoms, my hair, the full range of my vocal talents. I chose to disregard mummy's foot under the table warning me to tone it down a bit. David loved it. He could hardly take his eyes off my tits; it was a department in which Sally was not so opulent, and he was awed by me. When everyone was talking, and my eyes were glinting with the sherry I had put away, I leaned across to him and murmured: 'David, you like what you see?". He reddened and nodded: "Very much".A look at Sally's face ought to have warned me off, but it didn't.

It was later, in the kitchen, when we ladies were washing up, when I got the full blast of Sally's ire. "You've got the makings of a first class whore!" she snarled furiously. That rocked me back on my heels, and what made me the angrier was that I knew I had acted quite unforgiveably. I had wanted revenge for her jeers and had made a dead set at David. I blazed: "You bitch!". Our eyes were hot and seeing it, mummy pushed herself between us, filching the kitchen devil from my hand. The quoted trifles were nothing to the other insults we hurled at each other in that kitchen; these I do not record out of very shame. But when a lady has to contend with another of her sex, she is ruthless. Females do not understand chivalry; this is a masculine attribute. A lady goes in for the kill, knowing no other way.

Mummy did not appear too incommoded. Perhaps she was used to our enmity, but she too had taken on board a gang of wine. I think, deep down, she revels in the TNT in me, for she told me once that a lady had to take care of herself when she didn't have a man to do it for her. And, indeed, a lady is tougher than men think. The 'little woman' thing is a confidence trick women use on men, for it makes them feel big and strong; but a female is quite prepared to wade ankle-deep in blood when faced by an enemy. But I am sorry for that election night, deeply sorry.

Driving back in the car little was said about it. Mummy slept; but daddy, at the wheel, adjusted his mirror so that he could see me in the back, and I could swear there was an amused smile hovering around his lips. The following morning I rang Sally to apologise but she slammed the phone down on me, and I cannot say I blamed her.

Looking back on that Election I now see that we ought to have known we Conservatives were going down to defeat. In January of 1945 mummy had gone to a house sale in Sussex, to meet a friend, and in the course of chatting had said they expected Mr.Churchill to get in. Living in the country, we knew nothing. One of the auctioneer's men turned to mummy: "Couldn't help overhearing what you said, Madam. You probably don't know, living in the sticks. But London's gone Labour crazy". We simply hadn't believed it. We thought it was working class partiality. How smug, how silly we were.

After this episode I returned to the War Damage Commission and my Francoise. She was dejected too, but at least the man for whom she had addressed envelopes, Gerald Williams, had got in. That was a consolation for her.

In our political defeat, we plunged ourselves into such delights that Tunbridge Wells could offer, and they were considerable for zestful young women, with rampant sexuality. So lets talk about the town for a while.

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS



Speaking of a town one knew in one's youth is very difficult. It is also painful, for it reminds one of lost youth. It is therefore, at times, almost too painful to bear - a kind of exquisite agony. One also comes up against memory's defects. On our annual visits, Francoise and I marvel at the differences from the town we knew; and yet physically the town remains much as it was outwardly. I speak, of course of the town centre. The residential town has spread. To the south it has come marching over a hill that was green in our day, like a brick army invading Sussex. People have to live somewhere and I do not presume to criticise.

In the war and just afterwards Tunbridge Wells was the headquarters of Region 12 in civil service terms. I have already said that Francoise and I were part of that scene, working at a mansion known as "Dunorlan" which stood along the Pembury Road. The house has gone and the grounds a playground for the citizenry. We walked in the park one year, voicing our astonishment, regretfully, sadly, nostalgically at the changes which had taken place. We felt as Sam Pepys must feel if he visits his beloved London in the glimpses of the moon. I suppose all middle-aged people feel the same.

Not that anyone could weep over the house that has been razed. An architectural monstrosity of the kind built by those with too much money and too little taste in Victorian times. I think its builder was a retired tea planter (doubtless with funds obtained by cheating the natives) and I believe there was a date 1861 on the place. Its interior exhibited the worst excesses of the time - too much gold leaf, with cherubs and satyrs leering from every wall; too much red marble and so on. Yes, it was tasteless.

In our day the town boasted four cinemas - the Opera House, the Ritz, the Kosmos and the Great Hall. The Opera House, with its three copper domes is (I think) now given over to Bingo sessions but in our days it was a cinema, except for two weeks every year when the Tunbridge Wells Operatic and Dramatic Society - one of the 'Methuselah' societies of the south of England - held sway there. Or so it appears to us now, and from their personnel we seem to remember the names Lyn Hepworth and Mavis Vyse. Yet it sticks in our minds that it did have professional stage shows too. I seem to remember seeing a pantomime there, and the name Erika Storm is dragged out from the recesses of the mind as someone undertaking the "breeches part". So possibly it was Dick Whittington. I do not recall, and neither does Francoise. Remember, it was more than forty years ago!

The Ritz Cinema at the top of Mount Pleasant subsequently suffered a name change to the Essoldo I recall, but in the days when Fran and I haunted it, it was the Ritz and boasted a Compton organ. As far as we can recall, it never had a resident organist but visiting organists came. One we remember is Harry Robinson Cleaver (he of the Granada, Tooting) and sometimes his wife, Molly. That we both recall his white-suited person rising up out of the nether regions means, I suppose, that we were young and impressionable. The Florida Restaurant was upstairs and here, when occasion served, Fran and I had tea (even though French, she quickly acquired the tea habit!). Now the whole shebang has been converted into three cinemas, I think.

The Great Hall cinema was usefully situated opposite the Central Station (in those days, pre-Beeching, there was a West Station too). It has gone through many vicissitudes since our day and is now, I hear, a shopping mall. We both remember two films we saw there - Walt Disney's "Fantasia" and "Cat People" with Simone Simon. But the first film I ever saw in Tunbridge Wells was at the Ritz - Claude Rains in "Here Comes Mr.Jordan".

The Kosmos was in Calverley Road, now given over to multiple stores. The cinema has long gone. I suppose we must have gone there sometimes but I cannot recall. One thing we do remember is that it was always referred to as "the flea pit", probably quite unjustly!

Francoise says that Mount Pleasant is the Champs d'Elysee of Tunbridge Wells. Well, it certainly has trees! In our day it was different than now. Near the top, opposite the Ritz, was the Cadena Restaurant and this often felt our little feet. It is amusing to recall that one could have one's tea there in genteel fashion and listen to a trio playing Strauss and Lanner! Our memory does not quite go back to Beau Nash! It is this kind of facility, with waitress service, that people of our age regret. We often talk about it, Fran and I, wistfully, deploring the junk food cafeterias that have supplanted the more graceful living that we knew.

The vast abortion of brick known as the Civic Centre (or am I being too unkind?) still dominates the middle of the town, comprising Public Library, Town Hall, Assembly Hall Theatre and Police Station. Though in our day the library was unfinished, work having been interrupted by the war, and this facility was located in a house in Dudley Road, opposite the Opera House. It was here, much to Fran's delight, that I was mistaken for a young star soloist who had appeared with the Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra. The more I denied the impeachment the more the man demanded my autograph. Eventually Fran had to extricate me with an early display of the icy hauteur that has since become so famous a part of her armoury.

Yes, Tunbridge Wells had a symphony orchestra (and may still have it for all I know; forgive me, I live in France!), an amateur or semi-amateur combination I believe, with soloists "of name" and, in my time, conductors like George Weldon and John Hollingsworth. Pooling my memories with Francoise we both agree that we saw people like Walter Giesking, Irene Scharrer, Moura Lympany, Eileen Joyce, not to mention the soloist with whom I was confused, and who I had better not name! They played at the Assembly Hall Theatre, where plays were also staged. Do I remember Harry Hanson's Court Players?

The southern part of Tunbridge Wells is the most historic, with the church of King Charles the Martyr (so dedicated at the insistence of the Tories who dominated in 1684; come to think of it, they still do!), Mount Sion and the Pantiles, the raised walk for which the town is famous. Of course, it has changed much since our day. In those days the Pump Room stood at the southern end. This has been supplanted by a modern shopping precinct. I remember that when she first saw it Fran wailed in dismay but we now agree it was done with restraint. More recently, on the Lower Walk, an old building which in our time was, we think, a furniture repository, has been converted into something called The Cornmarket, a hint maybe of its original function.

There is a good deal of eighteenth and early nineteenth century building in the town. The local authority, it seems to us, has always been aware of its heritage.

Beau Nash came here, seeking to impose the same rules as he had at Bath, but while it is easy to invoke his memory at Bath, it is almost impossible at Tunbridge Wells. The truth is that Nash made only fleeting visits to 'the Wells' where he found the amusements 'neither elegant nor diverting'. Tunbridge Wells scored by its proximity to London but by little else. It was fundamentally rural. It had no Ralph Allen and no John Wood. You cannot compare the two places. In any case, Nash saw Tunbridge Wells as a competitor to Bath, where his word was law, and was determined to keep it subordinate to the Somerset town. One has to look determinedly for eighteenth century Tunbridge Wells, whereas at Bath it hits you in the eye!



Fran and I have a great love for Tunbridge Wells, as indeed we should for it is the place that saw our formative years. Its great Common - rus in Urbe - was our happy stamping ground both by night and day. It is some size but we always aver that if we were set down in it on a dark night, we would know precisely where we were despite many years sojourn in France.

These recollections are the result of a "Do You Remember" session that she and I spent one Wednesday afternoon, at Chinon, gazing over the river at the ruins of the ancient chateau, where, as everybody in and outside France knows, Charles VII met Jeanne d'Arc.

"I well remember" Fran murmured, "walking with you over Rusthall Common and gazing with awe at the barrage balloons. You told me they started at Redhill and ended at Dover. Poor Dover! It took an awful pasting from the Boche. It seems to me that we were paying out war damage claims on Dover until we left off work". I had forgotten that about the balloons until she mentioned it. It shows you the tricks that memory can play.

Then she reminded me how shocked I was when, coming out of the Opera House one summer evening, she and I nearly bumped into two of McIndoe's boys - two badly burned airmen aided surgically by the legendary Sir Archibald McIndoe at the Royal Victoria Hospital at East Grinstead nearby. The mind forgets what it does not choose to remember and it was her words alone that brought it back to my recollection. Even the sun at Chinon did not stop me shuddering at the memory. It had been my first brush with the reality of war; before that only the official newsreels and the output of the Central Office of Information had impinged upon my consciousness. Yes, I was shocked. The fact is, it made me feel sick. In those days I was terribly squeamish. I pillory myself willingly, because I had read Richard Hillary's "The Last Enemy" and had no reason to be shocked. War is a hideous thing.

Then she giggled suddenly, reminding me wo two right wing ladies had been physically ejected from a meeting of the Tunbridge Wells Discussion Group which met, we recall, somewhere in Crescent Road. We are certain it was up steps, for we were hastened down them. We had no wish to be there really (after all, there were far more interesting things to do) but we had been cajoled by an architect at the office. So we went. I wish we had not. Convent girls as we were we really couldn't take the slurs on the Holy Father, and we got just a mite angry. At that time most of the audience was on the Left and our class instincts began bubbling to the surface. There was one other nice right-wing young woman there called Yvonne Dewar, not in our set of course (her father was licensee of a tavern in St.John's Road) but a good speaker. Francoise, slightly flushed, turned to me: "Into battle?". I nodded vigorously. "Into battle". I adored Fran then, as I adore her now in middle age. She was quite wonderful. I can see the sweet girl, proudly erect on her heels, holding forth heatedly, I might even say passionately, and the room getting more and more hostile to her. Yvonne Dewar turned around excitedly, clapping silently to encourage us. I smiled at her. Conservative views were not fashionable then, and it was good to have another lady warrior for the Right with us. Fran, her colour high, got so angry that she relapsed into idiomatic French. Then I stood up, flinging back the lies into Socialist faces. Someone yelled: "Get those Fascist cows out of here!". The Dewar girl cried out: "No, no, give them a fair hearing". A fair hearing from Socialists? We were grabbed unceremoniously, lifted aloft, and bundled to the door. We squealed in outrage, for male hands were where male hands should not be without permission. At the bottom

we stood, rubbing our savaged breasts, and staring angrily back up the stairs at the closed door.

"Bastards!" Fran said hotly. And indeed, it was grossly unfair. Fran is not a fascist, nor am I. She would have gladly given her life for la belle France, as her father in fact did. It was simply that she came from a very well-breeched Breton family, of good descent, and she could not be other than she was. Politics, she will tell me now, is a matter of self-interest, and there is much truth in that.

Outside the hall I calmed her somewhat but with some difficulty. We wandered into Calverley Gardens. The putting green was still open, so we had a round and I tactfully let her beat me. This put her in high good humour. In that far-away voice she uses when she is thinking of bedroom matters, she murmured, as we handed back the clubs to the man: "Wonder if mama is out yet?". For the record, mama was!

We walked along Church Road, towards the Common and Mount Ephraim where we lived. Just as we drew level with what was then Romary's biscuit factory two boys approached us, endeavouring to chat us up as the phrase is. Fran dismissed them imperiously, rather as you flick aside a troublesome fly. She had other things on her mind that night. But the things they bawled after us still makes my ears go pink. Fran took my hand, pressed it gently: "Isn't it wonderful to be the prey?". The wicked twinkle in her eyes remains fresh over all these years.
"What do you say, darling?".
"I'd say you were right" I said judicially, with all the gravity of a teenager.
"And who needs animals like them anyway?".

How early one's life is set! Mine was a delicious wartime with Francoise. I make no excuses for it. I enjoyed it and her too much. Come to think of it, I still do.

But I must not give the impression that all my memories of the town in wartime were good. One night I nearly came to grief and I will recite the story to show just how easy it is for a girl to be overtaken by disaster and how fallacious is that female phrase "I can take care of myself". Or as a famous actress said: "Little man, I can sort you out any time I want".

I well remember the night after my eighteenth birthday. It was dark, (we still had the blackout) and I was a fool. Fran had gone out with her mother for a meal with a man who would one day become her second father. There was no television in those days, simply radio. They had a Cossor I recall, with plenty of pop and crackle. So I decided to go out for a walk on my own. It was stupid.

For my birthday I had received a very nice, belted, thick camel coat, very warm and cosy. So tying a silk scarf around my throat to keep out the cool night air, and drawing on my kid gloves, I prepared to go. I checked myself in the mirror, approvingly. I tightened the belt. I did look good. No, I wasn't looking for adventure that night. I didn't have Fran's comforting prescence, and her extra year of experience. It was just a ploy to flush ennui away.

There was little street lighting. It was dark. As I approached the Five Wayes (a confluence of five streets) my heels sounded loud on the paving stones. High heels were an emblem of my sex, of which I was proud; yet the tap-tap told listening ears that it was feminine feet approaching. Fran always told me I was innocent about such matters. Maybe so.

I walked along Calverley Road, glancing in the shops as I went, right up to what was (I think) in those days called Carr's Corner. I then decided to walk through Calverley Park, an early 19th century private estate designed by Decimus Burton. I don't think I met a soul. Even



today it is quiet; then it was very quiet. My staccato tap was the only sound to be heard, apart from the slight breeze rustling leaves on the trees. The dark never scared me, strange for a female; I liked the anonymity it gave. The houses were dark also, the blackout was good. I came out into Grove Hill Road, which led down to the Central Station. I wondered what to do. Lower down the road there was a tavern, opposite the then newspaper office (*). I knew enough to avoid that; the thought of drunken servicemen gave me a chill. So I decided to walk through the tree and path covered open space known as The Grove and so into the High Street. Woman proposes but God disposes.

You enter the Grove under an archway; immediately I heard someone being sick. I knew it had to be a man; no lady would do anything so unbecoming. I peered into the gloom and saw a soldier leaning against a tree, groaning. I hurried on my way, my woman's instinct telling me there was danger. I heard army boots behind me. I panicked and started to run. At first, being a girl I was fleet of foot but then, getting out of breath I slackened my speed. He had more stamina and was coming on, his steel shod feet sounding like doom. I ran blindly, not knowing where I was in the dark. It was in fact Madeira Park as I realised later. I knew I was fleeing rape.

No male can understand the terror of a girl in these circumstances, and it is difficult to describe. To know that you are regarded as fair game produces abject terror. The fear is of violence, forcible entry into your body and perhaps strangulation to cover up a heinous crime. This has been going on since the beginning of the world, yet every girl fears it. If men knew what rape is like they would never do it. They would recoil in horror for they would know the enormity of what they do. But men see only a creature, not really made in God's image, placed here for their use. It is vile. It is a lack of respect, even of hate for her beauty, an urge to destroy, fundamental to the male animal.

He was now close behind me, for my heels impeded me. My breath came in sobs, for I knew I had to turn and fight. I whispered a Hail Mary, and signed myself, then turned to meet my fate, whatever it was. Big hands clawed at my breasts. I thought of Fran and she gave me strength. My cousin had drilled me very well in what to do in a desperate situation. Could I remember? He laughed throatily. I jabbed my fingers into his eyes. He screeched, calling me an unprintable name. I threw caution to the winds because I had to. I punched him in the throat; he choked horribly, staggering towards me still, big hands fanning my face. I leapt back, then remembering Fran's adjuration to "kick 'im where it 'urts", I kicked him hard, and it certainly hurt him. He went down bawling, and thank God he hit his head on the pavement. I took one look at his sprawled bulk and fled.

I realised afterwards I had run, crying, down Cumberland Walk (it had once been called Patty Moon's Walk) to the church of King Charles the Martyr. I leaned there for some time, trembling, remembering what mummy had told her youngest daughter: "You may have beauty, but men have strength". I knew I'd been lucky, perhaps luckier than I deserved.

How I got home I do not recall, my brain was too fevered. I think I took a risk and went the closest way, over the edge of the Common, seeking shelter among the trees. What I do know is that when Fran came into the bedroom I was already in bed, trembling and red-eyed.

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(*) I think the tavern she must have in mind is The Kentish Yeoman which stands opposite what was then the newspaper offices and Weekes department store.

She saw immediately of course, and I told her. She unzipped her dress and quickly kicked off her D'orsay pumps; sliding into bed she held me tight. (*)

"And you left the animal on the ground did you?.....bravo..... oh bravo, my own one.....what a gallant girl you are. I'm so proud of you".

And then we slept in love.

So much for Royal Tunbridge Wells.

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It was at a party at one of the big houses around Frant Sussex, in 1947, that I first saw (though not met) Cather. Julia, with whom we were destined to spend much of our live. that comes later, much later.

Francoise and I breezed into the thronged room with the assuranc good-looking birds. Driving out from Tunbridge Wells in Fran's roa ster, we had dwelt excitedly on the prospects for the evening, on what we would like to happen to us, as young women are apt to do, when they are experimenting, and have not yet settled into their lifestyle. Ever since I had seen Fran's invitation, with its post-script 'Please bring Joanne', I had had an anticipatory frisson. That night we were ready for combat. We had giggled much, in breathless excitement. Fran was flushed, her tits reaching out for adventure. Yet why do I exclude myself? She hardly needed to tell me what she wanted; I knew. She wanted to be laid. Expected it. Yearned for it, as she did, cyclically. As we entered the room, several smooth-cheeked young men detached themselves from their escorts and surrounded Fran and myself. That was strange, for everyone knew what we were; but maybe it wasn't so strange. We were AC/DC. That is, while we preferred tit, if we were in the mood, we could be accommodating, if the lad was pleasing.

Fran had it made, and she knew it. French, sexy, exuding pubescence from every pore. She had her jacket tossed carelessly over her left shoulder, male-wise, one slim finger through the tag. I wasn't far behind her, for I was half-French too, but modesty prompts me to stop there! Years later Cathie told us that it was our quite insufferable arrogance that got to her.

It was quite obvious that my cousin was agog for adventure. I saw the young men look at each other, knowingly. That look said as clear as print: "They're ripe for the plucking". And there is extra status among one's mates, I had heard, in tumbling a lesbian. Fran knew men quite as well as I did, but she laughed unconcernedly. The resentful looks of the other girls was so much water off a duck's back. I saw a petal mouth form the words: "Big breasted cow!" but Fran ignored it. She didn't always. I've seen her bounce a girl of a wall for saying less, but this night she had other fish to fry. Their looks were malevolent and if looks could kill, Fran would have crumpled there and then. But nobody messed with Fran or I. Equipped with the knowledge that Fran's soldier father had passed on to her - martial arts and the like - other girls never messed with us. We had a reputation for leaving even young men on their backs staring skywards, all unheeding, and we were generally regarded as "poison".

It was then that we both saw Cathie, a Lauren Bacallish figure in a dark, but very modish dress into which I'll swear she had been poured rather than donned. She had blonde hair and amused blue eyed. She later told me that for no good reasons her belly started to contract.

"Its Fran!" chorused the lads and she smiled, accepting the adulation as her birthright, allowing herself to be piloted to a chair.

To me her eyes were dismissive, mocking. I didn't mind. I knew the score. She'd said to me: "Its every girl for herself tonight, cherie. Don't look for help. You wont get it". And she'd kissed me on the cheek. "You look wonderful. Give them Hell, cousin".

I gathered my own little court. I arranged my slim legs to the best advantage and allowed hungry eyes to drink me in from gleaming black courts upwards with an inward smirk, savouring the power of sex. They all tried it on that evening, and I countered easily. But there was one bloke called Phil, quiet and apparently shy. He stood sipping his drink, watching. He didn't lay a hand on me but I knew he was

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dangerous. In fact, he chilled me. There was something in his eyes that told me I must not risk being alone with him. He was muscular, broad of shoulder; I guessed he was a young farmer, or maybe a farm labourer, although how such a one found his way to this kind of party I couldn't imagine. I knew I wouldn't have a hope in Hell in his hands in the state I was in. Had my limbs been in co-ordination, well maybe. I knew techniques he didn't know, so in ordinary circumstances it would have been even-stevens. Although I knew him to be dangerous, there was that bubble of recklessness within me, a longing for experience.

I glanced at Fran. I could see I was on my own; her silver trill enchanted her swains. Or was it her accent? The thing about Fran was, and still is, that she is only as drunk as she wants to be. That is to say, her calculating mind is always in control. It occurred to me to wonder what two dedicated lovers of satin skin were doing in this heterosexual trap.

Phil plied me with drinks. His plan was obvious, but I was curious. He told me about the used car he'd just bought. I was impressed, like any young woman. Could he give me a lift home? I smiled, saying I'd see. "I came with a friend" I explained, weakly.

"Oh, her! You won't be going home with her. She has other plans. You'll need an escort".

"Maybe".

"Not maybe".

I remembered what Fran had said about being shafted. She'd laughed. Yes, I'd need an escort, but not Phil if I could help it. I knew he wanted to put his hand under my skirt. I'd have to fight my way home, and in a moment of sexual madness I thought that would be fun.

Across the room the blonde was watching me with tolerant amusement, but also (so she told me later) some concern. She saw me sinking into an inebriated torpor, and mentally shrugged, judging that I wanted to be laid. She turned to her escort, a fair-haired bloke, tall, good-looking in a craggy way, older than I was by a few years. He sat on the arm of his escort's chair, nursing a brandy glass in strong hands, and worldly-wise as I had become under Fran's tutelage, I saw the bulge in his trousers. He couldn't take his eyes off me. He grinned; I smiled faintly, lowering my eyes demurely. If someone had told me I was going to be the guy's wife, I would have laughed hysterically. Yet it was so. Me? A lesbian? Well, you'll see, come time. I asked Phil who they were.

"The blonde and the fair-haired bloke?". He took my empty glass and appropriated a champagne cocktail from a passing tray deftly. "That's Catherine, the Hunt Secretary, lives at Crowborough. Monied they say. The bloke is a friend of hers, Harry something or other. Cartwright I think. A business man. Lives in London but has a factory or something in Surrey".

Another of my little court chuckled. "Don't think about it, Joanne. She's as queer as a seven pound note! Know what they call her?". I shook my head; how would I know. "Miss Touch-me-if-you-dare". They all laughed in the dirty way men have a habit of doing. Then they told me a story which Cathie modestly swears is apocryphal but which I quite believe. It seems the MFH dragged her from her horse and into some trees with obvious intent, but had woken up with a very sore head. It stimulated my interest. One of us, was she? I stole an admiring glance at her from beneath drooped lids. Her honey blonde hair bounced sexily off ivory shoulders. I frowned, resenting my internal fever.

The evening pursued its predictable course. There was more booze and



dancing and I played along. I even let myself be taken outside on the terrace. I did what was expected of me, yielded to a certain extent, allowed my ear to be nibbled and listened to the sweet insincerities, while controlling groping hands. It was all very enjoyable and I laughed gaily, stringing them along, making implied promises I had no intention of keeping. My throat came in for a good deal of attention and I closed my eyes as if in ecstacy. Well, it was fun being desired, it always is for a girl, even though her basic nature is elsewhere. But I knew the dangers. My jacket was undone, my blouse distressed. Male hands caressed my boobs, sending a quiver through me. I gasped, I moaned, and in sheer desperation I ordered them to take me back inside.

Esconced in my chair I felt better; I gripped the arms of the chair, trying to stop the beating of my heart. I was flushed and felt hot. I needed a drink. The young men grinned, forcing one into my hand. It was alcoholic and good. Soon the fountains of fear stopped flowing and I didn't give a damn. I wasn't drunk, just very high. My speech was slurred, my movements erratic and I laughed a lot. It was then that Phil moved in. He bent down, whispering in my ear.

"You seen the view over Eridge Park from the first floor? Its very romantic, looks wonderful in the moonlight".

"Does it?".

"You'll love it".

"I must see it sometime".

"Why not now?".

I smiled up at him. "Not a good idea, Phil. I'm just not able....".

"I'll help you" he muttered thickly. Yes, I thought, I know how you'll help me.

"Its not just that, Phil. I'm the worse for drink and you're a strong young man. A girl has to be careful". I playfully pressed his biceps. "You see".

"You're afraid" he jeered.

Well, I was, and with good reason. But then madness gripped me, a kind of mental vertigo. Looking back on it in middle age, I do not know why I was so foolish; but I stood up suddenly, swaying. "I'll show you if I'm scared! I want to see that view".

The scowl of disappointment left his face, and there was a flare of triumph. I didn't see it but Cathie, watching carefully, said she did, and gave me up for lost. But I did see Phil's trousers bulge and I laughed in derision. What fools girls are! He took my hand and piloted me through the throng. As I passed Fran, we exchanged a glance, knowing and reckless. I should have run, but the booze dulled my apprehensions. He was eager as we climbed the stairs; teasingly I hung back, making him sweet-talk me forward. It was quite delightful. At the top a passage stretched before us. I tottered along this, giggling, walking uncaring into danger. At the end was a door; he got me against it and attacked my lips. I squealed once, then yielded. The realisation, much too late, of his strength partially sobered me. I fought back desperately; somehow, I knew I was doomed. I tried to apply the techniques I knew, but he knocked my arms aside. Then he clipped me lightly on the chin. I remember the nausea. I slid down the door uncontrollably, his face a blur. I started to whimper. He pushed open the door, flicking the light switch. I felt myself being dragged. I lost a shoe. I started to cry. "Cry away, bitch" he growled, "you've got it coming".

We were in a junk room, a storage room. It was cold. He dropped me down. I tried to get up, weakly. He pushed me back. I knew I was done for and lay there, defeated and pleading. Fran always said: "Never plead, never beg, spit in the bastard's eye". But I was not Fran. I didn't have her steel. I was afraid.

He bent over me, tearing open my blouse with one deft movement of his large hands. Some of the buttons parted company with it for ever. I reached up to ward him off and he was as hard as iron. He knocked my arms aside and I knew there was nothing else I could so. I sobbed.

He fumbled with the zip of my skirt and dragged it off. Then the slip. He tore at my cream satin panties. It is very easy for a man to undress a lady, to indulge his gross desires. He drank me in gloatingly. Then he growled: "Now you lousy pervert, prepare to take your medicine".

I screamed for Fran and he shut me up. "You stupid fool! Why d'you think we invited her? We knew she'd bring you. We intended to get both of you. You've both been hawking your tits around Tunbridge Wells for too long. After tonight maybe you'll think twice before acting like men. I wanted you, bitch. It was you who put my brother to sleep. This is for him". He punched me hard in the face and I passed out.

So there you have it. It wasn't just your common or garden rape, a straight forward fuck. It was revenge pure and simple. No man likes to be beaten by a girl and we had been using our expertise on men. For Fran and I it was delightful to lay a man low. And now I was getting my come-uppance.

When I recovered consciousness he was in me, pumping and I screamed as he spurted into my body repeatedly. Then he tried to eat me, while I jerked and beat at him weakly. He was like some monstrous animal. He laughed contemptuously at my puny efforts. "Don't try it, honey. You haven't got a hope in Hell. Hasn't your friend told you this is an occupational hazard for women? This is what women are made for, all you're fit for. But I'll admit you're a looker".

There was much else in this loathsome, chauvinist vein. I hated the bastard. I hated men, who thought like this about ladies. I wanted to kill this apology for a man. I felt dirty, unclean. My head jerked side to side in a frenzy as he manipulated me. I was in pain, immersed in it. It seemed to flow over me like a sea and I knew no more for a time.

When I was conscious again I saw him standing, still grossly monstrous, grinning down at me. "You're brave. Laid back and thought of England, did you?". It was a perennial joke. I turned my head so that I didn't have to look at him. I ignored the mockery of his words; all I had left now was pride, pride in what I was, pride in my womanhood. Now his heat had been vented on me, in the coldness of the room he was becoming more flaccid by the minute. My own body was like a furnace.

I risked an insult. "You bastard! One day, when I'm a mature lady I'll find you, wherever you are, and make you pay for this".

He kicked me, stopping in the middle of pulling up his trousers to do it. "Watch it, honey. You've got off easy. If you were a man I'd bash your face in. But you're a bint. Humiliate you I can, bash you silly I cant. You've got a good face, wouldn't want to mess it up, not too much. Its a bit bloody now but it'll heal. Be as good as new. You'll be able to churn men up inside again, don't worry". He paused to do up his buttons. "What's it like being a lesbian?".

"Wonderful!".

"You're a disgusting pervert. But I dont suppose you can help it being as you are". He laughed. "Like to see you in thirty years time".

"Oh, you will, don't fret". I was venomous. "You'll pay for what you've done".

Again he laughed. "I'll send Fran to you, if she's on her feet". Then he was gone.



I lay there, trying to locate the source of pain. It was between my legs, there was no doubt of that. I tried to move, crawling as far as the wall and crouching there, head bowed. I saw my skirt and panties where the animal had hurled them but I lacked the will to crawl towards them. Then Fran entered the room, carrying my shoe. I lifted my tear-stained face. She said I would have melted the heart of a statue. She ran to me, holding me tight. I smelt the drink on her breath. She put the shoe on my foot. Then she asked a dam-fool question.

"Poor, poor Joanne! Was it very bad, cherie?".

"It was frightful. And I hurt like Hell".

She took my face, caressing and kissing it. "This happens you know. We're girls".

Francoise is of the stuff from which warriors are made. To her I was just another lady fallen in the war that never ends. I felt I had to warn her.

"They're out to get us. Did you know? I've had my crucifixion. Now its your turn".

"Yes, I know" she whispered, softly. "I guessed it a little while ago. Well, I guess we had it coming. We walked into a trap. But I can handle it".

"You think?".

"I think".

"They're strong animals".

"I know, but I'm a lady. We're the superior sex".

"But not the strongest".

"Well, I'll fall as bravely as I'm told you did".

She cleaned my face and helped me dress. I did up the ruins of my blouse.

"Look, Joanne, you'll think I'm a hard bitch but I've got a lift back to Tunbridge Wells". Her lips twitched. "Yes, I'm going willingly. I'm going to confront a beast. Anyway, can you take the car?". I nodded and she dropped the car keys in my jacket pocket. "You can bring it back when you come in again".

I said I would and kissed her, wishing her luck.

"I may need it" she observed gravely. Then she held me at arm's length. "And listen. They'll be waiting at the foot of the stairs. They'll gloat at your degradation. Walk proudly, like a lady. Don't give them satisfaction, not a crumb. They'll jeer, the pigs. Head high, arrogant disdain is called for, you agree?".

"I'll do my best".

We kissed again, then she was gone. I was alone. It was true. It was every woman for herself. I gained my feet, steadied myself against the wall. I thanked God for high heels and the poise they give a lady. Then I went out to face my tormentors. So running the gauntlet of masculine filth as I descended the stairs, while nasty, was no more than a matter of distaste.

"Enjoy it, did you, darling?.....What's it like being laid?..... Let me give you a tumble sometime....." were some of the less obscene remarks. God, how I hated them. I met their foulness with head held high, cold disdain. I'd been defeated, and it rankled. Phil stood, grinning from ear to ear, lighting a cigarette. I looked at him.

"Remember what I said" I murmured, menacingly. "One day.....one day I'll make you pay for this".

They followed me out to the steps, and even down to the car, mocking me. "Now don't forget" laughed the rapist, "if you have a kid, name it after me!". Naturally, I did not deign to reply but as I drove away, scattering them, I had a chill around the heart.

On these occasions a girl needs her mother and I drove straight home to Kent. I dont remember the journey at all. I only remember the tyres crunching on the gravel of the drive. It was gone midnight and my parents were in bed. I let myself in by the side entrance, so as not to disturb the housekeeper or mummy's maid who lived in the other end of the house. My parents had heard me, however, and met me as I hurried up the stairs as I ran crying into my mother's arms. "I rather think" mummy said to daddy over my shoulder, "we can dispense with the male presence on this occasion. This is a woman's matter".

"Oh, mummy" I remember whimpering, "I've been raped".

"Child, you think I'm not a woman too?".

Mummy is a tower of strength, and being a French lady a sexual realist. She had known, as a lady always knows, what had happened. She kissed my tear-stained cheek.

"In the morning you'll go to the doctor, but now you need a bath. There is a lovely male smell about you. You don't need to tell me you've had sex with a man. Or rather, he's had sex with you. Well, Joanne, it is a woman's lot, whether it is legalised or not. And you've been drinking, hard I would say. That is foolish, darling, with men around. Was Fran with you?". I said Yes, and that by now she was certainly in a similar condition. "No, doubt. I was raped once myself, did you know? Yes, in Paris. At knife point; it wasn't pleasant; but however it is meted out you can hardly escape it. Unless you are a nun, of course; and there is little of the nun about you I fancy". She made a comic face that lifted my spirits; I laughed in spite of myself.

"But why are men such bastards?".

"It is the nature of the beast, darling. As I have always told you. Now take off your clothes and have your bath". Then, as she watched me the inevitable question came. "When is your period due?". And when I said next week, she said: "Well, let us pray it comes at the due time".

Well, it did. I was lucky. I had never been laid low by my period as had Francoise been. This had worried me, and also my parents, secretly. Mummy dreaded it, whereas I was only grateful.

It may surprise you to know that there was no thought of going to the Police. But no girl went to the Police in my day; you nursed your wounds in private and did not expose yourself to the humiliation of a Police court and what went before. A woman's lot in a Christian environment is not quite as bad as in the Moslem world where a woman is regarded only as a mobile vagina; but in practice it is not that dissimilar. Men (and especially the Police) always think that rape is the woman's fault and an occupational hazard she has to expect. Second-class citizens? I think you could say that. So you have to be a brave soldier and not whimper. It is made plain to every female that it is indeed a man's world. He can take his pleasures where he will, but a lady does not have this facility, though in later years things have been easier.

When we got to work on Monday I could tell Fran was excited. She put her finger to her lips. "Tell you tonight. Mother's out". It was a long day, for she was radiant with experience.

Fran's mother went off to the Conservative Club in her finery - black dress, triple row of pearls, fur coat - to meet her gentleman friend. A most broad-minded lady, Fran's mama. "I'll be late" she murmured, admiring herself in the hall mirror. She smiled at us: "Have fun you two". There were no secrets between these two; they were more like girl friends She simply didn't care about our noncomformity. It was nice.



In bed, our bodies closely knit, Fran told me what had happened. "Wow! what a night" she began dreamily, "it was fun. Sorry, I know you had a hard time. Write it off as experience; its part of being a lady".

"Don't tell me" I remarked. "So what happened in his car?".

"Oh, Mon Dieu, it was battle stations. He was a joy". She gripped me hard. "He started doing everything at once, and expertly. He ripped open my blouse, sucked and caressed my tits until I was frantic..I was getting weaker.....Joanne, it was wonderful. He knew I wanted it but when his probing tongue wrapped itself around my tonsils, I had to fight. I struck out, hitting air mostly, and when I didn't he just laughed and went on with his business. He was methodical, diabolical. "I'm going to fuck you" he whispered, "you delicious little bitch". You know what its like".

I knew; her nails were digging into me as she relived the previous night. I squealed in pain, and she giggled. "Sorry, but it was so wonderful. When he said that, I told him to get on with it. He called me a randy bitch. Well, thats what a lady wants, isn't it? I wanted him in me, and he was driving me crazy. Then he did put his hand up my skirt and found out what I already knew; I was wet. By this time I was helpless - I've never felt so weak and helpless. And all the time he was whispering terrible things, frightening me and at the same time thrilling me to the edge of fainting.....".

Re-living it seemed to exhaust her and she lay quiet for a moment. I could feel her heart pounding and stroked her hair.

"His finger went in me and I remember screaming. Then there was blackness. Then when I recovered, my door was open and and he was all set to push me out, whether to fuck me on the grass or because he'd finished with me, I don't know. I couldn't have cared less. He could have screwed me all night for all I cared. Then something happened, very quickly. His door jerked open.

"You.....naughty boy!" said a contralto voice.

An arm sheathed in spotless white camel came into the car and a gloved hand fastened under his armpit. "Up Jenkins!" she murmured. And suddenly where he had been was air. I heard profanity from a long way off, a grunt and then silence. Then there was a blonde woman, smiling kindly. I was moaning and whimpering. I'd been stimulated cruelly and I hated her for stopping my pleasure. "Worse things happen at sea" she said. Then she lifted me as if I was a bag of feathers and carried me to her car, stepping over the body on the way.

Something prompted me to put an arm around her neck and she bent down and kissed me.

I croaked: "You haven't.....".

"Killed him?". She laughed, softly. "You can't kill his kind, much as he deserves it. He'll have a sore head, thats all. And I'm surprised at you. They told me you were lesbian, like me. I'd never let a pig like that enter me".

I was defiant. I told her I wanted to know what it was like. Then she asked me if he'd entered me. I told her he had because when I recovered consciousness, he was still pumping. She didn't like that. Her nose wrinkled with distaste. She said I'd have to keep an eye on my period. Clucked over me like a mother hen. What do you think about that, Joanne?".

I was pleased for her and said so, but I was jealous. I had a competitor, a rival and looking at Fran's face, flushed and happy, I knew that an era had ended.

"She's like us" Fran burbled on. "Hates men. She's invited me to go and live with her full-time. Got a big house at Crowborough. She fancies me. Isn't it wonderful?".

I said I guessed it was, but what about her mother. "Oh, that's no problem. I think mummy would like me to go. She wants to marry again and I'm a bit of an embarrassment. A roadblock on the way to matrimony, you know. The man Forrester doesn't like people like us. He's an army officer, like daddy was. I'm a daughter of the regiment you know" she added proudly, "and I quite understand mummy falling for a British officer". So could I. Fran's father had died for De Gaulle in Normandy, a fact of which Francoise was inordinately proud.

"I'll miss you" I told her, wistfully, feeling the cat in me rising. I was jealous of this Cathie woman, which considering my own fate would be wrapped up with hers, is, in retrospect comic. "This blonde must be really something".

"Good Lord, Joanne, nothing's changed. I'm still your Francoise. I told Cathie I couldn't abandon you. And she said, of course not. She suggests a threesome. She's a wonderful woman. It'll be the three of us against the beasts. And we'll drive in to work every day. And we can service her as she deserves".

I was happy about this but I wondered what mummy would say. Nothing puts mummy off her stride. "If thats what you want, darling". So we joined Cathie at Crowborough and it was lovely. Cathie had horses and being on Ashdown Forest, the riding was fine.

Soon after this, however, something happened that I must tell before continuing with the main narrative. One day at the office Francoise got up from our desk and walked away without a word. I was surprised, for being lovers, we were a unity. After a while I got up and went to the Ladies Room. I heard sobbing coming from the cubicle. I pushed the door open and there was Francoise. She had been edgy all week, pre-occupied; even Cathie had noticed it. I took her in my arms, asking what was wrong. "I'm pregnant" she whimpered.

"How.....".

"My period is late".

"So? How long? A few days?".

"Two weeks".

I was staggered. "Two weeks!? Are you quite mad, Fran? Why didn't you say? It never occurred to me. I had my period as usual".

"You're a lucky bitch, Jo. You don't have the trouble I do. I'm damned near prostrate. You have a little discomfort. I'd look to that if I were you". There was another rush of tears. "But me. I'm a ruined girl".

"Oh, come on, Fran! There are ways and means. You've got wealthy friends. Like me. I dont want to see your lovely body swollen".

"You mean you'd help me with the fees?" she whispered.

"Fool!" I said savagely. "I'd insist on it. What is it? Not even a button off my blouse". We cried together.

That night we talked about it, she, Cathie and I. She wanted to share the costs. "But I'm not having you going to a backstreet abortionist. I know a good man, a first class surgeon. You'll go private, none of this NHS stuff. Have it done quickly, Fran, before the damned things grows too much. I'll make a few telephone calls".

While she was doing it, I asked Fran if she knew who the fellow had been. "Of course" she said, "that bastard at the party".

"You don't think he has a right to know?".

"No, I don't. Its my body. He's had his pleasure. He'd only tell me to get rid of it, like other girls do. Or did you think he'd make an honest woman of me?".



"No, I guess not".

"Not that I shan't have to get married". And when I raised an eyebrow, she flared a little: "Its alright for you. Not all of us have got a trust fund. You need never work. Here we are in 1949 and you've got £250,000 thats been earning compound interest since 1937. If the war hadn't come I'd have been in your position". I could tell she was a little bitter, and I was embarrassed, because I knew that wasn't all I had. Moreover I knew my daddy's Will. "Of course I'll have to marry" she went on. "I don't want to. I hate men, like you do. As witness my belly. But I'll have to find a rich old man I expect. And thats a nauseating prospect for any young woman. Cold hands, cold heart".

I said nothing, for Cathie entered the room then, with good news. "That's settled. Ten days time. Its in Gloucestershire. Don't worry, I'll drive you down and stay. It doesn't take long. I was born in Gloucestershire, be nice to see it again".

I was pleased for Fran, but it was expressly against the teachings of the Church, and I said so. Fran's eyes flashed once: "Who's side are you on, Joanne? If priests were women, you wouldn't hear so much nonsense".

"Ten days" I mused. "Give you time to arrange sick leave".

"Thats another thing. Why dont you two give up that stupid job? You only did it as your war work. Hell, the war's been over for four years. Ladies of your breeding shouldn't be working. Ladies were designed for love, not work".

"And how could I pay my way" Fran asked, tossing her head.

"Does it matter? I've got plenty of money, so has Joanne".

"It matters".

"Well" Cathie said slowly, conscious that she was treading on hallowed ground, "if it is a question of pride, I do need a secretary".

"Seriously?".

Cathie laughed, levering herself up out of the armchair. "You want to see where chaos reigns supreme? I keep my study locked out of very shame. I'm a horsy person, not clerically capable". That was for sure, I thought.

"Yes, you need a secretary" Fran admitted, with a half-smile. "So what's the deal?".

"Whatever you want. Write your own ticket. Just as long as you stay with me".

Before that however she had to shed the new life growing within her. So she applied for sick leave. Now, you cannot keep things quiet in an office. It must have emanated from the Establishments Office; at least on the very day I had tearfully kissed Francoise goodbye and driven, very reluctantly to the office, I was in the Ladies Room when I heard a conversation, conducted conspiratorially: "Have you heard" a foreign voice said, "that stuck-up French pervert's got a bun in the oven!". And the conversation went on.

"Never!".

"So I hear. Always thought she had the makings of a whore".

I was furious. I adjusted my dress carefully, then pulled the flush. As I emerged, both women turned, not realising the cubicle was occupied. One said: "Oh God!" beneath her breath. The culprit, a mid-European refugee named Vlasta, stood her ground. Without preamble, I slapped her face; she reeled back, then came for me. She had spunk, did Vlasta. We grappled and went down. "Take that back!" I shouted. "Try to make me" Vlasta snarled. The other woman had run, screaming, for help. It took two men to part us, for our blood was up. And this little encounter, in defence of my absent cousin, saw the end of my civil service employment. I was not sorry.

I drove home and told my parents. "Bravo!" they both said, "we're proud of you. One should always protect one's friends". I changed into riding clothes and went riding on my horse. This was better than slavish work. It was while I was so engaged that I decided to have a gynaecological examination. Fran was quite correct. I was an apparently fertile young woman. A rape such as I had experienced ought to have produced the same effect as with Fran. It was worrying, so best get it cleared up I thought.

So I went to the Kent and Sussex Hospital at Tunbridge Wells. There was much prodding and prying, and then the man apprised me of the shattering fact that I was barren. I would never conceive, could never do so. No, an operation was not possible. I cried, for what, after all, are we designed for if not for that? Otherwise we are simply inferior boys. By childbirth a girl justifies her existence. "You can have a second opinion of course" the man said calmly, closing my file in finality. "But I assure you it will be a waste of money. And a beautiful girl like you can have a very.....er.....entertaining life, you know. And you and your husband can always adopt a child".

Young as I was I felt that rising ire that always afflicts me when faced with a chauvinistic male. I imagine it is so with most lesbians. We may have to compromise, the world being a male preserve but the hurt is always there, around the heart, when faced with male unconcern.

It was agreed I should take my problem to Harley Street, but one night mummy took me out into the garden and in the summerhouse we talked: "You know, Joanne" she murmured, "I have often been anxious about you. You are so lovely that my mother's heart feared that something would be denied you". She took my hand. "Look how Sally suffers with period pains and you have so little. Yes, I was troubled. Yet if, as the man says, you are indeed barren, it does not mean life is over for you. Some men do not want children. That is strange, yet true". I clung to her and wept.

"Mummy" I remember sobbing, "I love you so".

"And I too, my darling, love you. Are you not the fruit of my belly?".

It will seem odd that a mother and daughter could speak to each other in such melodramatic, not to say colourful terms. Yet so it was. I often felt that as a family we were out of our century!

So I went to Harley Street, with mummy in attendance. I had it all again, the indignities which every woman suffers on these occasions. Then to the man's office, for the result, for which I was well prepared this time. I had enhanced my beauty that day, really to protect myself from despair. I looked a treat, I really did. Every girl knows her attributes, and I knew mine.

"I am sorry, Miss Carminhow, I have bad news for you". At those words, in spite of being prepared, I felt two hot tears trickle down my smooth cheeks. Nothing is so demoralising to a man than to see a lovely girl cry. They dread it, and I could see he was moved. "Now come, Miss Carminhow, you must be a brave girl. I am afraid you will never have children, and no, I am afraid there is nothing to be done". He looked at me compassionately, searching around for consolation and finding only that which comes naturally to men: "Just think of the fun you can have, and without risk too".

I reached for my handkerchief and tried to staunch the bitter tears that streamed down my face. I was not a woman, I could not create life. I wanted to die. The consultant seemed in no way anxious to dismiss me; his time was being paid for. He could not take his eyes from my tits. They were young and firm and I was proud of them. I could see the effect I was having. It was nothing new. As I was growing up, my father's friends had looked at me in the same way, especially (it seemed to me) when I came in from riding, in boots. Mummy laughed and explained it to me, and I giggled: "Men <u>are</u> funny!". My mother nodded. "You don't know how much, daughter" she said drily. "Make use of it, cherie".



So the consultant's affection for my mezzanine area was no great surprise to me. I wondered, briefly, if he would pounce; then I recalled how strict the B.M.A was, and put the thought from me. I dried my tears, thanking him; he made a deprecatory movement with his right hand.

Smiling bravely I rose and made as if to put on my jacket. With almost indecent haste he rose. "Let me help you". I let him. Is not that what a man is for? And in the doing he contrived, as I guessed he would, to brush my left breast with his hand. I smiled knowingly, accepting my handbag from him. Despite my despair, from somewhere deep inside me, I found my womanly power consoling.

Outside mummy wrote a cheque, and after renewing my face with the aid of my compact, we departed. I forget what exactly we did. I seem to remember we ate in Oxford Street. Then a little shopping, then to Charing Cross, wanting to get out of London before darkness fell. Not many people were travelling and we had a compartment to ourselves.

"Well, daughter" mummy said, "there is nothing I can say that can quite console you, I suppose. Yet the man was right, the world is your oyster. Go and have fun. Being female confers many privileges. Men are simpletons, never forget that; we, as women, make use of their weaknesses. And you are not an ordinary girl. You are descended on both sides from aristocratic families. Even in these so-called egalitarian days, noble birth is worth something. You will be much sought after, darling. You have my high-cheekboned good looks. Men? You'll have to beat them off with a club!".

She laughed, and I with her. It was strange. As well as being my mother she was also my girl-friend. Impulsively I reached out and kissed her, not the womanly peck on the cheek, but on the lips. Something flared in her eyes, which she crushed. "Why" she said rather breathlessly, glancing out of the dirt-grimed window, "there is Peek Frean's factory".

For the first time in my young life I realised that not much separated Francoise and myself and mummy. Maybe it was something in the female side of the family. In fact, one of my eighteenth century ancestresses called Yolande had been a member of the Vestals of Venus, a lesbian society which drew a high percentage of members from the higher strata of society, maybe the highest in the land, as is frequently said. Poor Yolande perished at the Revolution, as a result of which I honour her greatly.

That very evening I had a call from Francoise, very chipper considering the abortion. "I'll be home soon" she promised, "but Cathie and I are going to have a few days touring the Cotswolds first. Eh? Oh, of course its gone, silly! Don't worry, we'll soon be frolicing between the sheets again. And, of course, I've sent in my resignation". I then told her I was also an ex-civil servant, and why. "And you did that for me?" she cried softly. "What a brave lady you are! When I get back I'll thank you properly. That bitch Vlasta! One day I'll have a few words to say to her".

So it came to pass that I went to live with Fran and Cathie at Crowborough. At the same time as this Fran's mother re-married and became "a Colonel's lady", a pillar of the local Conservative Association, all pearls and blue rinse. She was very popular among the "Madeira m'dear" set. I met them once or twice, and could see that she had esconced herself in what was, to her, Nirvana.

For Fran, Cathie and I life was very good, even in post-war Britain. If you can have female-type Musketeers, we were it (or them). Apart from keeping Cathie's study neat and tidy, seeing her mail was done, etc., life was quite idyllic. We hunted, we shot clay pigeons (what Cathie called skeet) and living birds too, we went to horse shoes and point-to-points, and participated in them too. We socialised, at parties and Hunt Balls; I came to enjoy the company of chinless wonders and their

vapid girl friends who boasted no abilities not of use in the bedroom.

Nobody messed with Cathie, or did so at their peril. I am afraid that Fran and I enjoyed our success in this free-wheeling, monied milieu. Cathie watched our carryings on with tolerance, but sometimes irritatio Then Fran would back off, pouting adorably, like Bardot, and Cathie would smile and disintegrate before my eyes. I knew adoration when I saw it. Fran had it made. I had it made also, but not to the same degre Not then. That would come later.

But Fran was a person torn apart by two conflicting needs. Predominantl she was gay as the modern word is, she enjoyed women's bodies; like myself she found men crude and banal, the natural enemy and animalistic Yet she carried within her the knowledge, instilled by every mother since Eve, that it is a man's world and that woman has one bargaining counter - her body. It is her passport to a comfortable life. Thus, knowing Fran's ruthlessness, I guessed that if Fran was to receive a heterosexual offer it would be folly to refuse, she would accept it if 'the deal' was economically viable. Alright, that makes her a gold-digger. I also knew that if she did that it would destroy Cathie, who would cheerfully die for her. So I dreaded what would happen if a rich man of suitable age crossed Fran's path.

This is what happened at a Reception for a French trade delegation. The invitation had come through Harry Cartwright, Cathie's business-man friend who had obviously fancied me at the Frant party, where I had been raped. Cathie said he was rich, had not married and still raved about me. I confess my belly turned to water at the thought of being handled by him. "Yes" Cathie laughed, "he'd be just right for you. And I would co-operate if I were you. He's living on borrowed time, is Harry. Heart trouble you know". I thought about it of course. But we are speaking about Francoise.

Enter Jean-Paul. Cathie was to curse the day she accepted this invitation, but maybe it was fate. The Reception was Day 1. On Day 2 Fran was in bed with him, giving her all, hating it (she protests) but deter mined not to let him get away. She was not like me, and I understood; I had money to burn, and she had not. On Day 14 she was in a plane to Orly and by Day 20 she was his wife. Distressed and bewildered, I flew over for the wedding at St.Eustache, known as 'Notre Dame des Halles' and let me say that Francoise looked the very image of Catholic purity in white. I met Jean-Paul of course and I didn't like him, naturally enough as he was a hated man and had disrupted my very happy gay life with Francoise. But he was a young tycoon and 'going places'. That was enough for Francoise.

"She just walked out" Cathie had sobbed, "Joanne, you know how I loved her. It was cruel.....how could she do it to me?". I held her and let her cry. Then anger took over: "Bloody Hell! I'm going back to America. Maybe I can get myself killed there". I told her not to be so silly, that there were more fish in the sea than ever came out of it, and so on. It meant nothing. "I'm going" she cried hysterically. So I put her to bed with a sedative, and slid in beside her; then, when she was asleep, her lovely blonde mane merging with my dark hair, I slid out of bed and crept downstairs and rang Harry, quite hysterical myself.

"Harry" I pleaded, "you've got to do something. Didn't you say you were looking for a Personnel Officer or something? Give her something to do. Keep her here. She's tough enough to handle trade union organisers I'm sure. I don't want to lose her, Harry" and I started to cry, the ploy a lady always uses. He soothed me, telling me he'd see about it, that I was quite right. Then he quite burned his boats.

"Joanne" he said thickly, "I love you, I need you, I want you. Cathie will have told you I haven't got that long. I'm asking you straight out, will you marry me? Make my last couple of years happy?".



I stood there, naked, staring in disbelief. I'd had several propositions of course but marriage was not included.

"Oh, Harry!" I whispered, eyes dimming.

"Will you?". There was pathos in his voice. I pictured him, tall, strong and lonely, wanting me. Against my will, I had a desire to comfort him.

"If you need me.....".

"I do, I do. I always have".

"Why didn't you speak before? Was it my.....I mean, because I'm gay?".

"Of course".

"You fool! All ladies have to compromise in some way. Because I'm gay I'm not the less female".

"You can say that again".

In my heart I had decided to take him, and was appalled at myself. My heart was beating loudly and I reached up to my bosom in a fruitless attempt to still it. "We'll have to meet".

"Oh, yes" I murmured softly.

"But mark me, Joanne" he said, firmly. "We'll do this properly. I'll have to meet your parents. And I'm sorry, Joanne, but I'm a divorced man. That means you cant have a church wedding and the Nuptial Mass which I'd like you to have". I told him not to worry, a civil marriage was quite adequate as far as I was concerned. But it troubled him, I could hear. He knew I was a convent girl. "And there will be no love before we are man and wife. I respect you too much for that".

When I lowered the telephone, I was crying. His kindness and forethought had quite seduced me. I crept back into bed. Cathie had not moved.

In the morning, after breakfast, I went riding. The Ashdown Forest was fine for that. A lot of it was then owned by the War Department but not all, and there was still ample land to ride in. When I left Cathie was packing but when I got back, about noon, she was in the garden, sitting in the sun. "Harry's rung, offered me a job". She was rather shame-faced. "No, I'm not going to America. Harry rang, says he wants me to take over the Personnel department in his business. So I'm going to do it. That means I shall have to give up this house. Sorry, Jo. The firm owns a house at Swiss Cottage. Harry says I can set up there".

"Sounds fine" I murmured, absently. "I'll go back to Kent. Mummy and daddy will be glad to see their wandering daughter, I expect".

"Especially when you tell them you're getting married".

"So you know, Harry told you".

"Why wouldn't he? Glad you took my advice, Jo. He's a good catch for any young woman. When did he ask you?".

"At the Reception" I lied. "I'd have told you before, but I had to think about it. Then you were so upset about Francoise. But I've decided. He loves me, the way he tells it".

"Oh, he loves you, Jo. Has done a long time. I'm pleased for you both, but especially for him. I've known him a long time. As far as any man can be good, he is good. I know you'll both be happy".

"It is to be hoped so. And I'll look after him, Cathie".

"You better had, or you'll have me to answer to". She smiled, but I knew she wasn't joking, not really.

So I parted company with Cathie, just as I had with Francoise, and I got all choked. Cathie was firm with me; she was, after all, a dominant dyke and I her loving puss. "Hell, Joanne" quoth she, "you'll be seeing me often. I'll see that you do. Harry and his lady will be giving dinner parties and you'll naturally invite me, won't you? I'd be insulted if you didn't. And we'll all get together one day, you, I and Francoise, believe if you can. Fran says Jean-Paul won't make old bones, well maybe. And you know that Harry, poor sod, is doomed. When he dies you'll not only be rich, you'll be stinking rich, and that is a comfort surely". I looked at her askance, and she laughed. "Sure your life is changing. I'm afraid thats how it is with life. Pity me. My life has been hunting, riding and shooting. Now I'll have to argue about wage rates with trade union representatives. You think I'm looking forward to it?". I guessed that the wayward daughter of a Gloucestershire county family wouldn't be looking forward to it.

I had my own problems though. While my life had been a matter of play I had coped very easily, but now there were so many things to do. First there was Harry, hot on the scent as only a man with limited time can be; but it wasn't only him. There were details of which I had no previous knowledge. True, I didn't have the bother of a wedding dress - for a civil marriage who needs it? - but there were a hundred and one things to do, it seemed. I got edgy, emotional; mummy said all brides get that way. I know Sally had but she had all the trimmings, Nuptial Mass and all. One day I cried down the phone at Harry; Sally said I was born to be an actress, as I could call up tears at the drop of a hat. Harry was soothing: "You've got nothing to worry about, cherub" (he always called me cherub, Lord knows why) "all you have to do is to get yourself to the Registrar's office on the due date, looking beautiful. Otherwise its all arranged. I don't want you worrying your pretty little head about a damn thing. Harry's here". This was like bathing in cream and I lapped it up. "And I'm looking forward to meeting your parents tomorrow".

"They are looking forward to seeing you, darling".

"I've been in touch with your father on the phone. Men talk, you know". I didn't, but I could guess. Daddy got infuriatingly arch, when I quizzed him. On the morning of the visit, he said to me at breakfast: "When Harry comes, after the greetings and a sherry, I want you to make your excuses and leave. I suggest you have your hunter saddled and ready".

"But daddy.....".

"I should actually be dressed for riding if I were you" mummy said, "you always look good in riding clothes. Harry'll love that. Full hunting array, darling; the stock against your dark hair looks particularly fine".

"Next you'll want me to ride side-saddle" I sneered.

"That is indeed becoming" mummy said gravely, "but I think thats overdoing it just a mite, darling. The white breeches with the black boots and jacket will please Harry's eye".

"But why do I have to make myself scarce?". I wasn't very bright that day.

Daddy fixed me with a steely eye. "You silly girl. Don't you know there are things to say, and papers to sign. Anyway, Harry wants it that way". I now got the picture, dimly it is true but adequately. If the process seems antiquated, that is because it was; so it was always in my family. Harry, and I have say bless him, had insisted on signing a document disclaiming any rights on my trust fund. It was sweet and kind of him. It seemed natural to me. So Harry came, boggled at my splendour, and kissed me decorously. We then drank sherry, while I sat upright and demure, having arranged my booted legs to the best advantage. Then daddy said: "And now, Joanne, if you please.....". Smiling, I made my excuses and left while my young body was tied up and delivered legally to Harry.



I returned about noon, as instructed, handed my horse to the girl groom, and when I had flicked a few hairs back into place, I went in. It was a dramatic entrance. I idly slapped my riding boot with the crop, before placing it, and my hat, on the table. Harry rose, and kissed me. "Its all arranged, Joanne".

"Yes, all arranged" daddy smiled. "You're a lucky girl".

Mummy had her handkerchief in her hand and her eyes glistened, but she smiled and took my hand. "I'm so happy for you, my darling".

"Of course, its a pity you can't have a Church wedding. Even the Anglicans wont marry a divorced man".

"Unless you want to be married in a Noncomformist chapel" Harry said.

I was appalled. "Good Lord, no, Harry. My ancestors would turn in their graves!".

Over lunch Harry couldn't take his eyes off me. Mummy had been right. My riding clothes entranced him, seemingly. His frank admiration was very warming. When Sally had told me it was wonderful belonging to a man, I had jeered; but now I understood, God how I understood. Quite suddenly I found myself wondering what it would be like when he entered me, and the room seemed unbearably hot. To cover my confusion, I reached for the wine, but the bottle jarred on the glass. Mummy's eyes twinkled.

When we had adjourned to the sitting room, with our coffee, Harry said: "I guess we'd better make our engagement formal, darling".

I smiled. A girl does not say, yes please. It is not done. Docilely I murmured: "If it is your wish, Harry". He excused himself for a moment. During his absence, mummy whispered to me: "He loves you very much, my dearest". I inclined my head, smiling proudly.

Harry came back, his big hand clenched tightly. I also saw the bulge in his inner pocket and my heart leapt. "I hope I have the right size" says he. "Cathie gave me your glove size and Asprey's said this would fit your little finger; but if it doesn't, they'll change it naturally".

Now, gem stones are part of a young lady's education. "Oh, Harry!". I didn't know what else to say, so kept repeating it, my voice becoming more emotional by the second. The ring was lovely, no, truly magnificent and fitted me exactly. It was not flashy, just a single diamond solitaire and I knew it had cost him hardly less than a thousand pounds. He insisted on slipping it on of course, kneeling by me to do so. A man abases himself in courtship, I knew, but makes you suffer for it; but no matter. To see a big man at my feet was pleasing to me. What does a girl do on these occasions except lose herself in the arms of the man who loves her? Mummy cooed, daddy rumbled appreciatively.

Then came the coup de grace. "I wanted to give you a present on this occasion".

I shook my head vehemently. "You've done enough, Harry. More than enough".

"That's for the man to say" came his gentle reply, as he smiled at my mother. "I'd like you to wear this for me when I take you out tomorrow night". From his inner pocket he produced another Asprey case, longer this time. Heart fluttering, I opened it with excitement. I heard mummy gasp. I gave a strangled cry. It was a diamond bracelet. I looked up with joy, and suddenly everything dissolved into a blur. It was too much; without begging to be excused (as I had been bred up to do) I fled the room, crying.

"Poor child!" I heard mummy explain. "You must forgive her, Harry. She's happy. Girls show joy strangely. When she's in control again, she'll be back". I heard him laugh understandingly.

And return I did, red-eyed and very embarrassed. But I was an engaged lady and no longer would Sally be able to score over me.

The action now shifts to my bedroom the following evening where I was being prepared for my evening out by my mother and my suddenly kind but really incredibly curious sister, Sally. I sat there in front of the dressing table mirror, stoically enduring the combing and brushing. Sally said I looked like a festival of lights, referring to the flashes the lights struck from my ankle-length constricting silver dress. In it I could do little more than take small steps, suitable enough for a lady in high-heeled evening shoes but I was well aware of my vulnerability. It was thrilling of course to the female soul, yet I was gloomy, drowning in foreboding. My family kept telling me I looked lovely; well, I did, but that was scarcely the point. I was a young woman and Harry was a man, and all that implied to my feminist soul. I remembered that film, "The Man in Grey", which I had seen umpteen times in which the chief male character refers to the young women provided for his delectation as "fillies in the paddock". That is what I was - a filly being made ready for the race, and I resented the unspoken expectations a man has of a lady he wines and dines. It is fun, the sweet insincerities of the male animal, but the lady always knows she will be expected to pay for her entertainment, and yes, I resented the inequalities of creation.

I thought back over the previous day and evening. After Harry had gone mummy had taken me into the garden, and we had spoken, woman to woman. She accused me of not being happy. I denied the impeachment, fingering my engagement ring.

"I'm very happy" I assured her, "but I've been bought and sold, haven't I, like a horse in the showring".

She appeared both amused and shocked. "But every lady is, dearest. We are a commodity. I don't care what one's position in life is, it is always a transaction. It is a man's world. Yes, stripped down to its essentials, discounting the romantic fog with which men delude themselves, that is what it is, true enough. The man cares for a lady's bodily needs in return for.....".

"I know what that is!". I laughed ruefully.

"Then count yourself lucky, Joanne. You will be very rich when he is no longer here. He is a nice man, your Harry. And don't say, yes, as much as any man is nice. Tell me, woman to woman, you dont want him".

"I can't say that, because I do. Strangely enough".

"It is not strange at all. He's dying and you have all the right impulses. He'll make you happy, in and out of bed, believe it".

"I believe it".

"There is the legal side, too. When he dies you'll get everything but not his family home in Berkshire, nor the business. He has to leave his sister something. And get this, Joanne. He insisted on signing a paper disclaiming any rights over your trust fund. And you think he isn't a good man?".

I had to admit it. But why wouldn't he be, living on borrowed time. But of course, I did him a great injustice, as I usually do with men.

"Of course" mummy said, tugging at my hair, slicing through my reverie and bringing me back to the present, "you know what will happen in the car tonight?".

I flicked a glance at her in the mirror, amused yet irritated. For what did she take me? "Of course. He's a man".

"Just wondered" she said softly.

"What you are saying is, I'm going into battle".



"Of course, darling. Every lady does".

"Anyway, Harry's bought me. He's entitled to see the merchandise".

"Joanne!".

"Don't be shocked. You brought me up to know the sexual realities like any good French mother. And I'm not going to resist. I will play the simple-minded, trusting female. Men like that. If I know Harry, he's got too much at stake to press his advantage too much".

"He wont. He promised your father and I.....".

"Quite so. But even if not, I'm a brave girl. Fact is, I have always believed that a lady has to be brave, just to live. We are the prey, the victim. Everyone knows that. Thats part of the reason why girls marry, for protection. From the moment a girl is born.....".

"Don't be bitter, daughter".

"I'm not, just brutally frank".

"Well, I must admit" Sally remarked carefully, much amused by the exchange, "if Harry can keep his hands off you tonight, he must be made of sterner stuff than most men I've met". This came very close to a compliment, and I shot her a grateful look.

"Quite so" I murmured, "and here's me trussed like a turkey ready for the oven!". She laughed. "You think he'll like me?".

"If he doesn't, he'll be hard to please". I thanked her, and she went on: "I was always jealous of you, Joanne. You know that. I thought how unfair it was that you should have everything. Now, I know you haven't and I'm sorry for you. You'll never know the wonder of having new life drawn from your belly, and the light in your husband's eyes when you hand it to him. Its worth all the pain". Seeing me wince, she reached out impulsively. "No, no, I'm not trying to hurt. Its just that I'm sorry for you, desperately sorry".

I sighed. "So I must take comfort from my beauty, musn't I?".

"And your wealth" mummy said. "Of course, no lady knows the nuances of a man's mind, and maybe its just as well. We know enough. But you certainly look as pretty as a picture".

"Well, that's true". My modesty has never choked me, you'll note. But why should a lady be modest over what she has? I strolled the smooth silver gown I wore. I felt like Joanne d'Arc in her silver armour, leading the assault at Orleans. My lips twitched in amused self-mockery. My silver evening shoes were no sabatons. I was just a lady going out to face the natural enemy. The dress was cut low, and my bosoms tantalisingly revealed. I fiddled with my earrings, absently, then rose to inspect myself in the full length mirror. I sniffed: "Battle-dress!" but secretly I loved my slim elegance.

Sally chuckled. "Don't try to run in it! But don't try to make us believe you aren't thrilled to the core. You're female".

We laughed together, I rather ruefully. Mummy helped me with the long above-the-elbow gloves. I was gradually being encased in silver. Then came Harry's present, the bracelet. Then I stood still while mummy slid her pride and joy, the tiara, onto my dark head.

"Oh God!" Sally murmured, "that really is something". I had to admit it was.

I smiled down at her. "Sally, have you ever thought how absurd ladies are, handing themselves over, partially clothed, to a predator? We must truly be mad".

Mummy exhibited her never-ending patience with her sexually rebellious daughter. "That's how it has always been. Who are you to complain? I went through it, so did all the ladies of our family. So stop it".

So I stopped it. It then only remained to insert myself into the silver mink coat, a luxurious item I had bought from Harrod's fur department the previous week. Sally had not seen this, and she gasped. "God in Heaven!" says she, signing herself in contrition, "that is really too much for an architect's wife to see!". Her eyes fairly bulged with envy. I said nothing, for I knew she could have dressed just as glamourously had her Socialist convictions not strangled her natural inclinations. She gave me my evening bag.

"Now" mummy said, her eyes shining with pride, "lets go and show daddy".

I descended the staircase gracefully and was happy at the effect I had on him. Poor daddy! He opened his mouth twice before utterance came. "Darling, you are luscious" was the judgement.

"That she is" mummy agreed, leading me to a chair, where I was to meet my swain. My heart was beating strongly and my legs were a trifle weak. It was exciting, yes, but I was also apprehensive.

"She doesn't look too happy".

"She's happy" mummy assured him. "But this is going to be quite a night for her. If you were a lady, you'd understand". The female can always put down the male with that jibe.

"Never know it, would you?".

I decided to educate him. "Dearest daddy" I sighed, "you see before you a lady warrior about to enter the lists. I'm nervous. I'm about to face a man's lance". Sally giggled at the imagery. "I'm lovely, daddy, I know it; but this fortress can be taken by assault. Thats why I'm subdued".

He was bewildered. "How can you sit there making stupid feminist jokes when you look like a convention of angels. You should feel proud".

"Why, I am, daddy, truly. But I am very conscious of my ancestors this night, especially Yolande. They all went through this, and fell gracefully. Can I do less for the honour of our family?".

My male parent rumbled with discontent. "I get tired of hearing about that damned Vicomtesse. She was a bad lot. She ran a gaming Hell and brothel. She deserved to lose her head on moral charges alone".

Mummy wasn't having that. For the ladies of our family Yolande was an object of veneration. I saw mummy flush and waited for an explosion. "That is not true" she stated mildly. "She was a gallant lady".

"There are times.....".

I was destined never to hear the riposte. We heard the sound of a purring car engine on the drive and the crunch of tyres on gravel. My heart started beating wildly as I rose. Sally kissed me on the cheek. "Give him Hell, sis!" she whispered; and breathlessly I whispered back: "I think the boot's on the other foot, Sally". Mummy kissed me too, giving my hand a squeeze. Then the door was opened and there stood the grey Bentley which Harry usually kept for business. My heart missed a beat because I knew the driver was separated from the passengers by smoked glass. Harry looked quite marvellous, slim, with white dinner jacket; it was hard to think he only had two years or less to live. I heard him mutter: "Christ!" when he saw me. I was pleased. I introduced him to Sally and watched him carry her hand to his lips, gallantly. Then he kissed me. "God, but you look good enough to eat!" he whispered. I whispered back: "But indigestible!".



It was a good piece of repartee but hardly germane. The chauffeur held the door open for me to get in, then arranging my coat. I treated him to my most charming smile: "Thank you, Thomas". Harry slid in beside me, taking my left hand as he did so. There was much waving from the car and from my family. Harry leaned forward to the intercom. "O.K, Thomas, let's go". I watched him flick the switch to off. I was off on my adventure.

It would be tedious to recount what was said, for it was highly pedestrian, centering around my looks, my perfume, and my general bedworthiness, and how he desired me. This is always delectable but amusing. I should admit at this point that most ladies find men jokes - dangerous jokes indeed, but jokes nonetheless. This is why when they get together and discuss their men, females tend to get hysterical. The extent to which men are slaves of their own passions is a never-failing subject of laughter. Naturally, this fact is kept from men. A wife and a mistress can often get along very well together, if neither is jealous; it is really this fact that makes men keep the two apart, for he fears the ridicule of his prowess if the two get together. Where polygamy rules women get on very well together. This is because men makes sex his god whereas women do not. And Harry was no different from any other man; sex was never far from the top of his head. Privately I laughed at him as most women do to their own men.

I knew, however, Harry to be a real man (as they say), just as every lady likes her man to be, and give or take his medical condition, lusty. All I had to do was wait. A lady is passive; that is to say, she cannot initiate, that is a man's prerogative and duty. Thus we have the famous saying: "Man acts, woman re-acts" and that is how it has always been. First, the softening up, the praising of my charms; then, as I knew well, the action.

I expected to be attacked in the car and I was; at least my upturned face received a good deal of attention, and apart from a frisson of distaste at the start, I enjoyed every minute. I yielded to his will. There was hunger in his lips, there was passion and I think I was just a little afraid. Men are so strong. A lady forgets that until she is in combat, and then it is too late. Very soon I really did not know what day it was, much less where I was, and he knew it. He kissed my breasts and I moaned with pleasure; he laughed: "You wait till we are married! This is nothing". Then, having stimulated me to the edge of frenzy, he left me alone. I lay there, throbbing, until I was in possession of my faculties again.

"You bastard!" I whispered without heat. In these circumstances men enjoy that female admission of defeat, for the implication is that the strong man has wreaked his will on the weaker vessel. I smiled, as he handled me, more gently now, gazing at my shining body with obvious hunger. "Don't be naughty" I pleaded, lowly. "Be patient. It won't be much longer, Harry darling. I want to be yours. I want you in me but only when we are husband and wife".

"I know" he replied thickly, "I promised your parents that".

Then, to my surprise, the car slid to a stop. "We're here" he muttered, "Quaglino's".

We dined well, and I drank too much wine. I confess it. I threw caution to the winds. But when my speech became slurred, he denied me access to the bottle. "You've had enough" he announced. I pouted, pleading. He was inflexible; no amount of feminine wheedling could move him. It was obvious to me that Harry intended to be master. And strangely enough that thrilled me. My first instinct was to rebel against the thought of being subordinate to a man but not for long. "Whatever you say, Harry" I whispered over my empty glass. "Am I not your lady".

"You'd better believe it" he grinned. I giggled.

After Quaglino's we went on to the recently opened Danny la Rue Club in Hanover Square. That night Elizabeth Taylor happened to be there. The floor show was brilliant, and there were two bands. It was my first transvestite show, something I have seen often since, in France and Germany. One has to hand it to Danny Carroll, he was undoubtedly the best in his particular line, at least as far as England is concerned; though there have been other excellent female impersonators, like Terry Durham, Ricki Renee and Chris Shaw.

On leaving Danny's Club it was very late of course. Harry said he wanted to show me the house of which I would be queen in four days time (yes, his very words). I was immediately on my guard; my brain screamed 'battle stations'. Yet I didn't seem to care a damn; I clung to Harry, game for anything. Yet in fact I did Harry a great injury. What it cost him not to seduce me that night, I only learned later. So I honour his memory very much. Come Hell or high water he would keep his promise. It seems odd to me, even now, that so much ruthlessness in business could run in harness with decency in his personal life. He would not take advantage of a young woman's vulnerability. He could have done so. I could not have stopped, nor indeed would I have wanted to. I was that far gone. My other side stood aghast but I will always look back on Harry Cartwright with fondness. He really did want to show me over the Mayfair house which I still own and will retain till I die.

Thomas was asleep at the wheel and choked on a snore as he was awakened. When we reached the house Harry said: "You can go to bed, Thomas. But put this car away and get out the Mercedes out before you do. I will drive Miss Carminhow home".

So he escorted me around his house. The bedroom was a typical bachelor's room; it would, I decided, have to be completely altered. We then adjourned to the drawing room and drank some more. I still kept a wary eye on him, for I still did not entirely trust his intentions.

It was exceedingly late when we finally got into the car, but I was not in any way weary. An eerie silence had long since descended over Mayfair and the purr of the engine was the only sound to be heard. Harry headed south-east. I knew he was making a totally unnecessary detour, but did not comment on it. I knew I wouldn't be home till dawn and didn't care a damn. Harry had his plans and whatever they were, I was game. We stopped somewhere on the North Downs escarpment, in a layby. It was very middle class I thought, but what the Hell. The moonlit Weald looked so fine, almost like day. I had to sustain his hungry lips again, but that was nothing. I felt safe in his arms. I lay, nestled against his shirt front, listening to him describe what he would do to me on the marriage night. It was exciting and frightening at the same time. I let him do just as he liked, purring as he lifted my hair and kissed my throat. Then suddenly, he reluctantly muttered: "I must get you home. In another hour it'll be dawn".

"I don't want to go home. I want to stay with you, Harry".

"I know, I know. It won't be long. Soon you'll be with me always".

"We'll have fun, won't we, Harry?".

"You don't know how much". I laughed sleepily. It had suddenly come over me that I was tired. "You'll be hung over in the morning. You put away a gang of wine".

So he got me home. "One goodnight kiss" he pleaded, thickly. I let him. It was torrid and penetrative. I cried out, my fingers deep in his hair, convulsively holding his head. I didn't want him to stop but I knew he had to be dismissed.

"In the name of God, go" I cried desperately. "You've got appointments tomorrow afternoon. Go home, get some sleep, then go and earn me some money". He laughed and went.



I waited until I heard the car die away in the distance before putting my key in the door. Inside I leaned against it, eyes closed, hand over heart. Mummy was at the top of the stairs, watching her youngest chick with an understanding smile. "Heard you arrive" she whispered. "Taken your time getting out of the car. Harry insistent?".

"Thank God. Makes a lady feel proud, doesn't it? How she can stimulate a man, I mean".

"That it does, child. Its what we are born for. The woman who can't is no woman. Now, let's get you to bed".

"Yes, I am a bit tired" I mumbled. "Debilitated, you know?".

She chuckled. "Rough night, cherie?".

"What do you think, mummy? Harry is a real man". Again she laughed.

She took my coat and hung it up. I flopped out on the bed in my finery. She started to undress me - shoes, earrings, bracelet, gloves, etc - and I let her. I started to give her a blow-by-blow account. When I managed to slip out of my gown and started to remove my panties, a fact of which I had been aware of all night became apparent to mummy. Mildly she suggested I might like to have a shower. I thought that a good idea.

While I was doing so she laughed suddenly, saying it reminded her of her first adventure by the banks of the Seine, five days after leaving the Convent. "A young army officer he was" she mused, "regular, not conscript. God, but he knew his business". The memory was obviously sweet. "Your father came later. That was an arranged marriage, like yours will be. Mine has been very happy and I know yours will be too. As long as it lasts I mean. But no matter, widows are respected by other women; they've been through the mill, you see. Ladies in our family have always married either for money or dynastic reasons".

"Money in my case".

"Well, yes, but Cartwright is a Northern name, and a trade name, true, indicating a rather debased descent. But your father has checked the heraldic visitations and there have been armigerous Cartwrights".

"Fascinating" I murmured sleepily, sliding into bed. "If I know Harry as well as I think I do, those things we find important won't interest him in the least".

"I'm sure you're right, daughter. But tell me true, Joanne, haven't men got more to offer than your lady friends?".

I opened one eye. "I still prefer soft flesh and satin skin. Men are so gross and banal. When I'm with them, I know I'm of the superior sex. But I grant you, Harry is something special. I'd have been a fool not to take him - even if the parish priest says I'll be living in sin!".

Smiling, she turned off the light and I was soon asleep. I slept till noon; when I awoke, as Harry had prophesied, I had a headache of quite devastating intensity. But 'the hair of the dog' and other tried and true remedies, plus a gallop across country restored me to almost pristine vigour. That evening mummy said: "You've got your wedding in three days. But I guess you are all prepared - sartorially I mean".

She knew very well I'd bought a beautifully cut suit and hat for the ceremony, in dove grey; there was also an expensive white silk blouse, gloves and court shoes. Oh yes, I was ready; even the clothes for the honeymoon had been packed.

"Never known such eagerness" daddy said, drily.

Well, I had every right to be eager. Against my will I found the prospect of being a married lady attractive. Other young women looked at you pityingly while you were a spinster, when they were not speculating on the reason why no man had made you his. Yes, marriage was welcome.

So the morning came. I found myself excited, not indeed about the ceremony. Cathie always says I am over-sexed. Well, maybe I am, but I had vertigo when I thought of being shafted by Harry. My mouth became dry and my heart beat fast. I resented my fever and thought of other things. Mummy was very emotional. When she adjusted my soup-plate hat (a style I loved then and love now) I could see her eyes glisten. "That milliner has done you proud, Joanne". He had. I felt very feminine and delicious I confess.

Cathie strolled over (she had driven her own E-Type Jaguar down from London) and whispered in my ear. "You reckon I should throw Harry in the swimming pool? You seen his loins?". I tried not to laugh, and told her to shut up, for goodness sake. Sally and her husband David were there. "Yes, she said, "sleek, elegant, upper-class. But a civil ceremony! But really, Joanne! And you a convent girl". I refused to let her spoil my day. She glanced at Cathie, a fashion-plate from the crown of her honey-blonde hair to the gleaming toe of her shoes. "So thats your erstwhile bedfellow. Well, you've got taste, I'll say that, Jo". It was a pity Francoise couldn't have flown over, but she was in Texas with Jean-Paul. I was envious. And Harry? He stood there, grinning in anticipation. My cheeks dimpled when I saw how he was. Daddy, seeing my look, took him on one side, as he said later "to take his mind of it". I had invited the closest of my riding fraternity, Pamela, although it was really a family affair; she was pleased to be among the people 'at the big house'. A rural snob was Pamela!

So we drove into town to the Registrar's office. I carried a posy to please mummy. It didn't take long to be converted (legally anyway) from Miss Carminhow to Mrs.Harry Cartwright. I got my marriage lines, which every bride treasures; and nowadays, when it is framed and exhibited in the room Cathie drily calls 'the Carminhow museum', I still treasure it. While I stared at it, Harry stared at me I was told "like a dog with a juicy bone". The marriage certificate read 'Henry George Cartwright, Businessman', then 'Josephine-Anne Seraphina Carminhow, Gentlewoman'. I had insisted on the description. I was blood-proud and am not ashamed to admit it.

So the deed was done and we returned home for lunch. Cathie was the star. She is a wonderful raconteur. She can be very racy with her stories, or what they call raunchy nowadays. But she tailors her material to the company she's in, and on this day she was delightful. Everyone knew she was a dyke, glamorous of course, but still a noncomformist. Perhaps it was the wine, but nobody seemed to care. Once Sally has a few glasses of wine in her, she relaxes. I drank sparingly, and ate even less. I could see, too, that Harry wanted to get away, as any normal bridegroom would. So we went. I turned to watch them until I could watch them no more. It was the end of an era. I was a maid no longer; I was a wife. I became tearful, but Harry understood. Harry headed west, heading for the Cotswolds. It was a stopgap, Harry not being able to spare any time just then for a longer honeymoon abroad.

I took out my marriage lines yet again and stared at them dreamily. He grinned: "Yes, you've landed me. All I have is yours, give or take". Give or take meant, not the firm.

"I rather thought it was you who had landed me".

"That's true. And you are something to land. But you know that".

I knew that. "Well, you waited long enough. Remember Frant?".

He laughed. "Ah, that night you needed to be spanked. But you've filled my dreams since that night".

I was touched. "Gosh, Harry" I gushed, "are you a spanker?".

"That excites you?".

"Every lady likes her man to be masterful".



"Then believe it. I'll spank you if you need it".

"Then I'll need it" I giggled.

I do not want to spend too much time on the marriage night, basically out of my respect for my husband's memory but it was not such as I had gleefully anticipated, and been promised. Men are apt to brag, and the lady apt to believe what the man tells her, so she gets excited, longing for the bridal chamber.

A young woman does her best for her husband on that night in the matter of lingerie. I had gone all Janet Reger, lush black shorties calculated to stimulate man's lust, and a quite divine negligee that rustled erotically. I felt sure that within seconds of his stripping me I would experience the limb-dissolving ecstasy of which Sappho speaks.

So Harry stripped me, expertly and excitingly, born of much experience, all the time whispering terrible things that near made me lose my mind. I lay there, naked, throbbing, wet, yearning for him to slide into my welcoming orifice. Then, to my horror and consternation, he, Harry Cartwright, the great lover, could not perform!!

God knows the poor devil tried, but he was incapable of the desired denouement. From my mountain top, I was plunged into the valley below. Every kind of emotion swept through me in quick succession - scorn, anger, contempt, disgust and finally compassion. I could not guess why he was impotent. But I knew I had to be careful, damned careful.

Mummy had given me good advice of course. Never laugh at a man's sexual prowess, or lack of it. It is the man's holy of holies. If he's lousy in bed, never say so. Moan as if you are in ecstasy. Laugh at him and you are a dead woman. More ladies have died that way than any other. So I didn't laugh. I wanted to, a scornful, contemptuous laugh. But I crushed the desire. But I was deeply hurt. I thought it reflected on my womanhood, my body, perhaps it did not stimulate him, perhaps I was unattractive to him. Yet the mirror told me my face was lovely, my body shapely and womanly, my bosoms milk-laden. I cried softly behind his back.

Then I saw his shoulders were heaving. He was sobbing his shame. It pricked my generosity. Why was I taking on so? There would be other nights, now he needed my smooth arms. I crawled over the bed to him, holding him, talking to him as I would a child, comforting him. Then I could only speculate and he would never tell me why; years later Cathie told me something.

We were in the tack room over the stables at our French home when the matter cropped up. "Blame it on your parents" she chuckled. "They put an impossible burden on a man like him. Not to have pre-marital sex. The day before your wedding he got his secretary over the desk, had it up her you know. I came back from the canteen and heard the squeals from his office. Oh, she didn't mind, it was looked on as part of her duties. Every month her salary envelope had to be taken in to Harry before sealing. He'd put in a personal cheque, for services rendered. Everyone knew about Priscilla. She was a pretty little thing, very working class of course, blonde, blue eyes, a kind of Dresden figurine in a mini-skirt. The workmen used to call her Pris the Prick, about their level, that". I asked if she thought that explained the wedding night. "Well" she murmured judicially, "I don't know how much men secrete but I guess its not inexhaustible. Women expect too much on their wedding night. I've had no experience, you understand, but them's my views".

But on the wedding night I knew nothing of this. Around two in the morning we slept through sheer exhaustion. So many tears, in frustration from me, in shame from him. He gave me his back. He could not bear to face his bride. It was the same in the morning, he was too ashamed. I saw him take medication from his suitcase. I guessed it was a relaxant. I do know it had high value, twenty milligrams, maybe Valium. I forget.

Over breakfast our eyes didn't meet, for man-like, he attacked the food with concentrated zest. I felt miserable. I poured the tea, and watched bacon, sausage and egg vanish with great rapidity. Then he demolished two racks of toast with only miniscule help from me. Quite suddenly I sensed a change in him. He sat back, replete, seeming to see me for the first time. Our eyes locked; I ventured a shy smile, to which he responded in a quirky way: "Thought we'd drive Tetbury way, maybe have lunch at the Amberley Inn" says he.

"That's fine, Harry" I murmured, hope burgeoning within me. I was amazed at the change in him. It was as if Hyde had taken over from Dr.Jekyll. He had a look of such intense desire that my heart lurched. I felt like a lady again, proud of the effect my body had on him. "Let's go" he said eagerly. He took my hand; how comforting it was.

Cirencester Market Place looked wonderful in the sunshine and I suggested a perambulation. "I want to get a paper anyway, maybe a magazine" I said with finality. He didn't dare be other than agreeable. As I was getting the Daily Telegraph I glanced sideways at him when he wasn't looking. He was quite swollen. I saw his hand go into his trouser pocket to control himself. It looked hopeful. I was happy again. But where he would do his business I couldn't imagine. I still marvelled at men. I remembered what actress Mary Astor had said about George Kaufman in her much publicised diary: "He's always hard". Well, so was Harry seemingly.

"Can we go now?".

"Why not, darling?".

I don't think we made it to Tetbury that day actually. I know we hit Stroud and he put the car at the hill leading to Minchinhampton Common. We had passed the Bear at Rodborough, and as we passed the Moor Court Hotel, he took the foot off the accelerator. I suddenly realised there would be no lunch at Amberley. I was apprehensive and happy all at once. He groaned, obviously in much distress. "Joanne.....Joanne, I must have you!". I glanced down at his loins with a fluttering heart. I heard myself saying gently, tenderly: "I am your lady. Lead me where you will". Being woman I wanted to bring him relief.

He had run the Mercedes off the road onto the sloping grass. We got out hastily as if answering some unspoken command. The ground sloped away towards a dry stone wall, presumably that surrounding the Moor Court Estate. In it was an archway. He dragged me towards it, my small hand in his big one. I laughed in mock protest at his long strides, so that he was almost dragging me along. He said nothing, he was a driven man. He was terribly swollen. I went eagerly, proudly; I stimulated this lust, I, Joanne. It was wonderful.

Once through the archway, he scooped me up, carrying me into some trees. He laid me down quite roughly. I did not mind. Male/female relationships are always violent. In my light summer dress I lay there watching him, anxious but relaxed, luxurious even. My fear was that he would come before he was in me, but thank God he did not. He had no time slide off my panties; his big hands tore them open. I gave a little cry, marvelling at the strength man's passion gives to his already strong body. He slid into my sex, and immediately exploded. I screamed as he pumped into me all those secretions that somehow he could not give me the night before. Again and again he pumped and I writhed in almost unbearable happiness that I had brought him peace. My hands, gripping his buttocks, dug deep. He told me to relax, that my long nails were drawing blood! I laughed, relaxing, sighing in wonderment and joy. It was glory being female.

We lay there, doing and saying the usual things. Then I asked him if he ought to be doing this with his heart being in the state his doctors said it was. "That be bugared!" he growled, "a man has to satisfy his wife".

"You satisfy her".

"That's all a man needs to know".



Before we went down to dinner that night I insisted he rested on the bed. He watched me as I sat in front of the dressing table, adorning myself, and I watched him. I thought in his dinner jacket he looked rather fine. "I always thought" says he, "that your cousin, Francoise, could have been a rival for Brigitte Bardot". I laughed, asking who I could have rivalled. "You're a one-off, my darling. You have no rivals". That was very warming. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Harry".

When we entered the dining room, people looked at us. When I was a young girl I had hated the way men looked at me, stripping me in their fevered minds. Now I liked it. We stood waiting for the Head Waiter and there was ample time for the men to drink me in, and the women to appraise me. When we were seated, I looked around. The old ladies were looking at me in benign fashion, remembering perhaps their own honeymoon and their husband's performance. I toyed with the Dover sole, ate more of the sherry trifle, sipped the wine. I whispered to Harry: "They're wondering if you make good love to me". He nodded, grinning. "And the answer is, you do".

"Ah" says he, a la Al Jolson, "you aint seen nuthin' yet!".

Good Lord, I thought, does he intend to mount me again tonight? That he did. As we sat in the lounge drinking our coffee, I could see him getting hungry. I told him with mock gravity that he was a naughty lad, even suggesting a turn around the Market Square to cool him down but he declined. Beneath his breath he muttered: "Get up them stairs!". As an attempt at repartee it smacked of the men's room, and was therefore distasteful to me. Yet I had hunger too, so docilely I put my hand in his and ascended to where love was dispensed.

Some while later, when we were both naked, I went into the bathroom, and when I came back I was mildly astonished to see him sitting on a chair, cock inflated and longing in his eyes. He grinned: "You're an excellent horsewoman, aren't you?". Wonderingly (for I was amazingly innocent) I said: "You know I am, darling". He nodded: "And you are brave in the hunting field?". Again, puzzled, I said: "You know I am, Harry". At that point it seemed all the blood in him rushed to his member. I was no shrinking violet but I remember flushing and getting confused. "Then ride this stallion!". And he drew me down gently but firmly and I gave a little scream as he penetrated me, then held on like grim death, jerking with the pleasure of it.

Every night that week he added a new variant, and while I was the happiest of ladies, for Harry was probably the best lover I have ever had, knowing his condition I worried greatly and I promised myself when we got back to London I would impose a more sensible regime. As the woman it was up to me to control his lust.

In fact, I consulted his doctor who filled me in on the facts of the case. What he told me alarmed me more than somewhat. "In fact" says he, "I disapproved of him marrying again. But having seen you" says he gallantly, "I can see why. You must be my ally in the matter of his medication. There is not much that can be done, I fear, but we can at least prolong his days. If he would retire, sell the business it would be more sensible. But he will not". That, I thought, is the last thing Harry would do.

Another thing we did when we got back to London was to hold a dinner party for my parents, Sally and her husband, Cathie, and a friend of Harry's called Sheri Masters, a wealthy widow from Belgravia. Immediately I met her I knew we would be friends in sweet adventure. Kindred spirits is what we were, then. We were both in our early thirties, in the full bloom of our beauty, and both of us sexually active. She was a widow, her airline pilot husband having been killed in a crash. I took to her at once, and she to me. To use a Western simile, we 'rode together'.

On that evening though I paid particular attention to Sally and her husband. I wasn't being really spiteful (although siblings can be so)

but I knew my lifestyle was grander than she could boast, and I had a totally deplorable wish to leave her in no doubt of it, with hovering staff. Cathie, I noticed, was always a little restrained in Harry's presence, as befitted an employee but on this evening she did not think as highly of Sheri as I did. So I carried the burden of hostess almost totally unaided. I plied Sheri with wine and questions in equal proportion.

Sheri came from Georgia originally, had been educated at Brynmawr Ladies College in Pennsylvania (this, by itself, didn't endear her to Cathie who had been at Vassar, at Poughskeepie in New York state) and then at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where she had got a Masters degree. Extremely right-wing, I think it jarred with everyone when she referred to 'Niggers'. Sally bridled immediately and locked horns with her but was routed completely, but in a charming way. Sally's discomfiture naturally pleased me.

Mummy and daddy were overjoyed to see me with my own establishment (or 'settled' as they said) and Harry so attentive. It was quite late when everybody left. Harry said: "How did you like Sheri?". I gushed: "Very much". He nodded: "I was sure you would". He put his arm around me. "When I'm gone she'll be a good friend, someone of your own age. With Sheri and Cathie standing with you, you'll have no trouble". I wished he wouldn't talk like that, but he had long since come to terms with the inevitable.

The following afternoon, while I was curled on a settee reading Vogue the cream telephone jangled. I flicked the instrument from the cradle. It was Francoise, ringing to invite me over to Paris for the weekend. 'He's away' she said (meaning Jean-Paul).

"Oh, Fran, I'd love to come. But I'll have to ask Harry first".

She made a petulant exclamation. "You sound like your actual suburban housewife, Jo! By the **way**, welcome to the marital club".

"Well, he is my husband, Fran" I cried defensively.

"Jean-Paul's mine but I don't let him make me run in harness".

"Its not that, but he's an ill man, a dying man in fact". I explained it all to her.

"That's different I suppose". I could almost see her shrug in her Gallic way. "Ring me when you've consulted your lord and master. If you come I'll meet you at Orly. I'm at the St.Cloud house. I've bought our house in the country - our house, dearest, not Jean-Paul's. He hates the country. Its yours, mine, and Cathie's".

"You still think that will happen?". I was wistful.

"I know it will. You say your man is dying. So what's to stop us?".

"Nothing I suppose. But dear Harry.....he's good to me, Fran. I'm so fond him. I can't bear to think of him dying".

"Oh, do stop it, cousin! Dying is the best thing a husband can do for a lady". I hate it when Fran allows her bitterness to warp her basic nature.

When Harry came home that night I asked him. "Ah, Brigitte!" he grinned. "Its funny, Jo. Cathie and I have got to fly to Lisbon on Friday. A guy is coming over from.....er.....North Africa about an order. Its a big one. So it'll be just right if you're in Paris. Shan't feel I'm letting you down. Ring Fran back why don't you?". So I did. She was overjoyed, so was I. I knew Harry would be safe with Cathie. What's more important to a wife, I knew I would be safe with Cathie. A steel-clad Lesbian is no threat. There was never anything between them, just friendship. Now, if he'd taken his secretary, Priscilla, then I would have worried.



So I went to Paris. I rang Sheri from Heathrow. "Keep your powder dry, darling. I'll be back Sunday night". We'd got that close. Fran met me at Orly as promised and we drove into Paris. Her kiss at the airport was quite shameless and warmer than was strictly necessary. I flushed; it was like old times. Neither of us had changed. She said it: "Thank God you haven't changed, cherie. Marriage seems to suit you. Get enough? Hmm! I get too much, but men are like that". I laughed at that.

They had a nice house at St.Cloud but I felt guilty as she pulled me between the sheets. "Him?" she murmured. "He's often away, thank God. Likewise I thank him for the feel of a female body again". I gathered from this that she didn't "mess around". I wouldn't have put it past her, but Fran had a good billet and she knew it. She laughed softly, after a torrid period: "I bet you've missed me, Joanne". I admitted it in a kind of heavenly dream.

Then she took me around the "special" bars, where all kinds of deviationists are welcomed. I found this very amusing, watching the traditionally butch dykes and their friends. "Aren't you glad Cathie isn't like them?" she asked. Then, lowering her eyes, she almost whispered: "I was a bitch to her, wasn't I?".

"Something like that".

"But I had to, Jo. You know how it was with me. I'm not like you or Cathie. You have money, both of you. I had to look out for the main chance, and take it. Cathie must know that. Jean-Paul was my passport to money. I didn't intend to work all my life. Or to sponge off my friends".

"How is marriage going?".

"Not well" she said shortly. I didn't press the point.

"He's generous, of course, and so he damned well should be. But in bed he's a pig. I moan as if I'm enjoying it; men like that. But is it not loathsome?". She sipped her drink gloomily. "I'm paying for security. But doesn't every woman?".

"I guess thats true".

"Bet your arse its true!" she muttered with unwonted savagery.

This exchange must have stimulated her needs. "Drink up". That was more like my Francoise, anxious for the bedroom.

The next day (that is, Saturday) we rose lateish and drove into Paris to shop. Over lunch at Ledoyen Fran mused: "You've got nothing in sable have you?". I said no, I had mink, ocelot and leopard but not sable. She attacked the lobster thermidor with relish. "How do you feel about a sable coat and hat?".

I choked. "Are you mad? That would cost many thousands of francs".

"Hark who's talking! Madame Money-bags. You're hardly ever out of Harrod's fur department!".

"True. Anyway.....".

"Well, firstly" she murmured, refilling my glass, "the money isn't important. You'll have it on Jean-Paul anyway. It can be written off as a business expense. I owe you, my darling, for pleasures past, present and to come - and the abortion. I pay my debts. He gives me a large clothes allowance you know". This last came humorously, with an upward sweep of her lashes. "Well, a man has to pay for his pleasures. Secondly, you'll love wearing it. It'll make Harry's cock rise, and that'll give you both happiness. And I won't always have Jean-Paul. You'll join me one day, permanently".

I stared at her. "What do you mean, Fran? About himself I mean".

"I've told you. The way he lives he won't make old bones".

"Fran!". I was shocked.

"You think I'm a hard bitch?".

"Thought had occurred to me".

"Then you're a fool" she riposted cooly. "You'll soon be free of Harry. You don't think I love Jean-Paul, or he me? It was a commercial deal. I sold myself like you did. Women of our class often do. Because of man's cupidity, any woman can get herself a meal ticket. As to Jean-Paul, he wanted me in bed, and he wanted a hostess, just as the same as your Harry. I'm French and I have charms. You've often told me, I'm sexy and men fall about when I give them the treatment, which is fun. You know quite well what I'm talking about, because you have it yourself. Upper-class elegance personified, that's Joanne. Jean-Paul wanted sex. And I wanted security. I wanted money, plenty of money like you have, and Jean-Paul had it. It works well enough, even if I am a martyr to his gross desires. But I'm a realist, cherie. I know Jean-Paul. He's a man in a hurry. He pushes too hard, he lives too hard. He'll burn up, like your Harry already has, it seems. Like Harry, Jean-Paul chases money like there's no tomorrow. Maybe there isn't. For him, I mean".

I thought they deserved each other but didn't say so. "And you help him spend it?".

"Of course. And when he dies, I inherit. Everything".

I stared at her with new eyes, and with some distaste I confess. But was I any different? No, I was not. She laughed at my obvious distress at hearing the facts laid out quite so brutally. "You're such a sweetie and I do love you so. I made you streetwise and yet you look at me with horror. I should be worried if I didn't know that below that veneer of shock you're just as much of a gold-digger as I am. We have the same blood, you and I. Its just that you were born rich. You can afford illusions. I could not".

I stared past her head for a moment. I was acquisitive, yes. I liked money, of course I did, like any lady. I loved luxury, well naturally. Fran would wade ankle-deep in blood to preserve what she had, and with a stab of sickening self-condemnation I knew I'd be by her side. I sighed, forcing a smile. "I expect my education has been sadly neglected, Fran".

"I see the marks of it in you constantly" she agreed, with mock gravity. "Its a man's world, so take them for all you can. And as for the coat, Jean-Paul will never know. He's too busy to concern himself with trifles. And his accountant is a friend of mine. He'd like me, if he could get me!". Her bland wink made me laugh.

I gave up because secretly I wanted the coat and she knew it. Why had I given her the argument? Because I wasn't so honest about life as she was, not so obviously a bitch, and felt I had to make the gesture. Which makes me a worse person than she. "Very well, Fran. I'll love the coat. And I'll thank you in bed".

She leaned back, toying with her coffee cup, and smiling affectionately. "That's my girl! Take what you can, when you can, where you can. After all, that's what men are there for, to buy us beautiful things".

So I got my sable coat and hat, purring like the veriest kitten as I pirouetted before the mirror. I looked a dream. Nor was that the only thing I brought home from Paris. I bought a rather dashing raincoat in Leda in the Rue du Faubourg St.Honore where it joins Avenue Marigny. Of course, when I got back to Heathrow I had to pay a bit to the customs but it was not even a button off my blouse.

Harry thought both were lovely. "But"..says he, "I'm a leather man. I'd like you get a leather suit".

I laughed hysterically. "Like that bird on television?". He was a slave to The Avengers I knew.



"Better than her" he grinned. "I want you completely enclosed".

I got the point. So he gave me a blank cheque and I went shopping. He told me there was a lady in, I think, Luxborough Street, who made female leather garments bespoke; and there was also a firm called Atomage who in my day were in Dryden Street, just off Drury Lane, but who subsequently moved to north London. This was next door to Anello & Davide where I bought my boots. So one day I got a taxi over to see them. Wow! I got the suit he wanted me to have, not an inch exposed to the elements; and because he liked the black shiny look too, I got the same suit in black vinyl. He had to wait to drool because these were made-to-measure. What a lady does for her man! Then I bought a hooded leather coat, and going to Anello & Davide I saw Mr.Bruno who measured me for a pair of thigh boots, and all to please Harry's fetishistic soul. I thought it was all rather silly, but I confess, it was fun. I swear that when I was equipped, the cost, even in the sixties, was well over a thousand pounds. But it was my husband's money, and he seemed not to care.

When we were on our own he liked me to prance around, naked except for thigh boots in black patent. I gurgled in delight as he carried me to the bed. This was just one of the games that men and women play. I knew Harry should not behave like this, but men cannot control themselves.

In this period of my life I was very sexually active. I don't think Harry ever knew but I also had a regular lover called Herman, an oil man who blew into London every other month. I had met him when I was 28 and living at home. I shall always remember how we met. It was quite funny. I had come to London to order a new saddle at Gidden's in Clifford Street and turning a corner he crashed into me. Men walk more energetically than ladies, having no skirt to impede them! It was quite a collision, sending me flying against a wall. In the crash I could not have any doubt that he was hard, doubtless busy with erotic thoughts as I judged. All apologetic anxiety he asked if I was hurt. I said no but that he should take care charging around corners like that. He agreed and stood back admiring me; and I did look good that day. I remember precisely what I wore - a leopard coat and pill-box hat to match, mock-croc fashion boots (they were just coming in), a ladies umbrella and kid gloves. Yes, I was worth looking at by a man who, as I learned, had left his wife and family in Den Haag. He said: "Let me take you to lunch". Now, no female can ever bring herself to say Yes straight off; it is called "the curse of Eve" because of the business of the apple. But I allowed myself to be persuaded, and he took me to the carvery at the Cumberland Hotel. It was here that I discovered he was a Jew, for though slicing me two slices of pork, he would not have any himself. He asked me, rather anxiously, if I minded Jews. Wide-eyed I said: "Why should I?". He assured me that some people still did.

Of course, being a worldly-wise lady I knew I would have to pay for my entertainment, and I didn't mind too much. Herman was quite good looking even if middle-aged. Anyway, I was a devotee of the 'if you've got it, use it' school of female thought.

Nothing was said, even in the taxi. True, he kissed me and, in that uninventive way men have, he told me I was beautiful. That I knew, my mirror told me. I said nothing when the taxi drew up outside a big hotel in Portman Square. He took me by the arm, saying any man would be proud to be seen with me. Going up in the elevator, I could see how hungry he was. A female gets used to that. I must say one thing about Herman. He did not pounce. That is what a lady hates in men, being taken violently. He let me remove my hat and hang my expensive coat up on a coat hanger. Then he sat me on the bed, and to my surprise, knelt down and removed my boots and far from tossing them aside, stood their glossy magnificence neatly by the wardrobe. Then he undressed me slowly making the removal of every piece of clothing a pleasure. Then all that afternoon (to quote Brantome) "he enjoyed me very sweetly". And, to be frank, I enjoyed him.

After our session, we showered together which was also an erotic joy; then, as I was dressing, he asked me if I would be his permanent mistress when he came to England. I was flattered, I was pleased. It said much for my beauty. But I hesitated. He told me he was happily married and I looked upon his wife as a 'sister' and I didn't want to bring her pain. While I was pulling on my boots, I said as much to him and he laughed. "Look, Joanne" says he, "I spend much time away from home, chairing international conferences and the like. I'm a man and my wife knows it, and is glad of it. I'm not a Christian of course, but I tell you she knows I'm no monk. I have ladies in the main cities of the world, and she knows that too. You are the loveliest woman I've found in London, and a real lady too. I promise you that as far as London is concerned, I'll be faithful to you. Will you be my lady?".

I stopped in the act of putting on my hat to look at him, amused but also excited by being his mistress; and naturally I said I would, a little tearful to be sure. He comforted me; then he offered me money, while holding my coat for me. I was offended, I did not regard myself as a whore. "No, Herman, I am not in need of money" I answered him a trifle cooly, pulling on my gloves. "You insult me, dear friend. You do not offer a lady money. If I please you, give me a present". He was rather chastened by all this, apologised humbly because he had no intention of losing me. So from now on he never failed to buy me an expensive trinket, a gold charm bracelet, a wristwatch, a cameo brooch and so on. And, I am proud to say, I serviced Herman until he retired to Palm Springs in 1978. Yes, I betrayed Harry, of course I did. I am a healthy woman, with a commitment to honour. I knew Herman would be here long after Harry had gone. I am sorry if that sounds hard, but a lady has to think about her future.

On this first evening he escorted me to Charing Cross station in a taxi and saw me on the Dover train. I gave him my home telephone number and he said he'd get his secretary to ring me telling me when he was coming. As my train drew out I saw him standing at the barrier. It was rather choking. I settled back in my First Class compartment in such a dream that I didn't really surface until I reached Tonbridge.

I hoped I could keep it from mummy but I was seated in the morning room one day, writing letters, when she brought in a tray with milk and biscuits and sat down, smiling. "Joanne, I'm going to ask you a question. Answer me truthfully, my dear. When you returned from town last night, you appeared on cloud seven, as they say. Have you got a lover?".

I flushed, and told her. She clapped her hands delightedly. "Joanne, my dear, I'm proud of you. He sounds a lovely man". I knew mummy had a lover too, a man who drove up from Romney Marsh for Hunt Meetings. As we were girl friends as well as mother and daughter we indulged in a woman's favourite occupation, laughing and comparing notes about our men. "But never let your father know" she laughed gaily, "he'd kill me! Nor would I be the only lady of our family to meet her death by manual strangulation". As if I would have told daddy! What a man does not know will not harm him.

I kept in touch with Fran by telephone of course; every week we rang each other. Occasionally, when it was possible (which was not often Harry being mostly at home) I crossed the channel by Hovercraft and met her at Calais. She would sigh: "Roll on the day!". Yet at that time in my life the heterosexual side of my dual sexuality was firmly in command and I had a fair way to go down that road before I would be satiated. That disgusted Cathie, I may say, but she loved me too much to let it show.

Then came the call I knew would come eventually, from a calm and much relieved Francoise. "Jean-Paul is dead" she remarked, almost casually. "He was driving south and there was a multiple pile-up on the Route-Sud. Didn't I tell you he wouldn't make old bones? What's that? Of course



I'm sorry, darling; its terrible that any human being should end up like that. But you can't expect me not to rejoice at my freedom. As I've told you, there was no question of love. Just a business arrangement. I want you to come over but the decencies have to be observed, you know how it is. Then I'll be busy with legal matters, and the businesses. Still, there is a first class staff, for the most part. A few will have to go, of course. I want my own nominees in sensitive posts.....". She burbled on like this for quite a while and I knew her cash-register brain was working overtime. I had to bring her back to essentials. "The burial? Oh, Menilmontant where he was born. I expect you've heard of it. Where Chevalier came from. Maurice Chevalier. Yes, that's right, "Louise" and all that. Me? No, I won't stay in Paris. As I told you, I've bought a place in the country, a manoir, near the Loire. Not the tourist part. It was dirt cheap, needs a lot doing to it. Next time you're over..... yes, it'll be some time, your Harry and all. And much as I want you with me, there's so much to do. You do understand, don't you? So many people relying on me now. Jean-Paul carried all this but now its all down to me. And its quite new to me. Well, like most wives I left it all to my husband. I have a lot to learn. And, oh God, the decisions! Make a wrong move and its money down the drain. Shuffling paper in a civil service office doesn't fit you for industry I'm afraid. I'll keep in touch". She rang off in a hurry, saying a call was coming through on another phone. I pictured her behind her big desk with some awe. I knew she was a tough cookie but I wondered how she'd fare in big business. Not well as I would learn later.

Naturally, however, I had other fish to fry. There was Sheri as a bosom companion. In those days there was no AIDS to make one fearful; one could behave normally with conception as the only risk. Not indeed that Sheri and I were promiscuous and it has to be said, men being what they are, bad things can happen to ladies even when they are not out looking for adventure. So it was with Sheri and I. I call what happened 'our first adventure' because that is what it turned out to be. Yet it was not our intention. We were out shopping when we turned down a street linking Oxford Street with Shaftesbury Avenue.

It was a bitterly cold winter's day. It was a day for high boots and a hooded cloak, thick and protective. Our hoods were lined with fur, a suitable protection for a lady's soft flesh. I suppose, in truth, that we did look like something out of Dumas. Sheri had in fact just laughed, seeing our reflection in a shop window. "We look like two of the Cardinal's guards!" she chortled; and I had remarked with humour: "I hope we don't meet any Musketeers then!". Then it happened.

We had seen these two men in anoraks and jeans and dismissed them as of no interest, just part of the landscape. Then, as we, and they, drew level with a public house, they grabbed us without ceremony and, ignoring our squeals of outrage, pushed us through the door and into the tavern.

They didn't apologise for manhandling us. We were told not to make a fuss or it would be the worse for us, and that lovely women must expect to be handled. I was appalled at such naked chauvinism. "Anyway" said the ginger-haired one, "treat it as an accolade, a tribute to your charms". Sheri looked at me, and I at her. Their sheer gall made us smile. They parked us on stools by the bar, and bought us a gin with Italian Vermouth each. Neither Sheri and I were in any doubt what we were expected to do. I saw a glint in Sheri's eyes, a devil-may-care gallantry that I have come to know so well. I bubbled inside, and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. She didn't actually say the words but she managed to convey the impression that we were available, two ladies of adventure. The men exchanged knowing looks; then grinning their heads off, the negotiations began.

"If you've got the time, we've got the inclination" Sheri remarked in a voice that would have seduced a statue.

"Have you now?".

"Oh yes" Sheri said, sweetly smiling.

"O.K. So how much?".

I thought it was time I said something. "Twenty five pounds each".

They blanched visibly. "Twenty five pounds?! Are you mad?".

I smiled at my friend and sighed. "Alas, Sheri, we've fallen among cheapskates".

"You're a liar. But youre damned expensive".

"Inflation is a terrible thing" I murmured.

"I'm sure" muttered one of them.

"You'll find it worth it" Sheri coaxed."We'll send you back to work happy. Think how you can boast to your mates you've fucked two rich ladies".

They grinned. "Something in that. Maybe it would be worth it, at that".

"In advance of course".

"Oh sure". Wallets were brought out and pockets emptied in the search for the fee. With the aid of the barkeep sufficient notes were found, crumpled indeed but legal tender. I took my £25, held out my right leg and pushed it down inside my boot, with all the sangfroid in the world. Sheri did the same.

"Well" the guys said eagerly, "we've got forty minutes".

"Its enough".

The one I called Ginger leaned over to the barman. "Charlie, rooms upstairs empty?".

"Sure, take yer pick".

Ginger caught me by the arm. "O.K, luv. You've had your money. You're mine. Let's go". Sheri's escort gripped her hard enough to make her give a little squeal.

I finished my drink, set the glass on the bar, and rose. I removed my cloak, draping it over my arm. My legs were shaking a bit, but it was exciting, an adventure. From now on it was every lady for herself. It would be rough but that was part of the attraction. A lady can easily be killed in the heat of passion, we knew that. Any 'fille de joie' knows this very well. But the bank notes, two tenners and a fiver, nestled comfortingly against my calf, between the red silk lining of my boot and my nylon sheathed leg. Sheri stole a look at me as we ascended the stairs. We were both flushed and excited by what was to come.

We had just time to deposit our handbags and cloaks on a chair when we were attacked. We squealed delightedly as thick fingers undressed us. Soon our expensive clothes lay scattered on the floor and we stood naked except for suspender belt, stockings and boots. We watched them tearing at their trousers, with amusement. I laughed breathlessly and Ginger growled: "I'll make you laugh on t'other side of your face". Sheri searched for and found my hand. They were immense, and Sheri's "God!" was almost inaudible. We were torn apart, she and I, and pushed down violently on the edge of the bed, so that our feet were still on the worn carpet. Ginger pulled my legs apart cruelly and entered me. "Now laugh!" he snarled, as he pumped. Sheri's strident laugh fell to a groan. I gave a stricken cry as Ginger emptied himself into me in long spurts. It was ecstasy but it was also pain. I wanted more. He called me a randy bitch. I helped and he gave me what I craved. I heard Sheri give a thin wail and in the silence that followed I plunged head first into an inky pit.

As I clawed my way back to life, I heard sobbing. Sheri grovelled on the floor by my knee. I was on my knees, laying back against the bed.



I groaned and slid uncontrollably sideways to join her on the floor. "God!" she whispered, "I thought you were dead, thought the swine had killed you. I was crying for you, not for myself".

"That's nice" I muttered, not recognising my own voice. "Were we mad?".

"No, just gallant". We clung to each other, Sheri and I, like two wounded warriors.

"You and your historical imagery. Pity you ever got your Masters Degree in History". She giggled, yes, she actually did, in that depressing place and in that situation. "Two Cardinal's Guards are we?" I went on. "Well, we met two Musketeers and they ran us through".

"But we're £25 better off!".

It was my turn to chuckle. "I didn't think they'd bite. Working class animals like that. Wonder what their job was?".

Sheri shrugged delicately. "Builders, scaffolders, who knows? Who cares? Quite a morning, darling, wouldn't you say?".

"I'd say".

We crawled across the floor to where our clothes lay. I watched her button up her blouse, as I did mine. She was actually smiling. I asked her if she was happy; she said yes, and wasn't I. I admitted it. She raked me with amused eyes. "Aren't you glad you aren't a virgin, Jo?".

"Don't use dirty words, darling! Anyway I lost mine in my teens. I've told you the story. One day I'm going to search him out and clobber him real good" I muttered, busy with my uplift bra.

"Don't be bitter. They have a need to get rid of it, and we a need to receive it". She didn't have to tell me. "God! but I feel weak, and I have that lovely male smell about me. Still, I'd like a brandy, maybe two". I nodded.

Just as we were zipping up our skirts, the door flew open. The barman stood there, scowling. "Hurry up, its closing time".

"Have a heart!" Sheri pleaded, adjusting her slip. "We won't be long, but we feel awful". She said it pitifully but it made no impression on him.

"Serves you bleedin' right. I want you two whores out of here pronto".

I bridled immediately. "We aren't whores. We're two rich married ladies". I thought the word 'rich' would impress a man of his kind but he was impervious.

"You're still whores. And if you're what you say you are, you ought to be bloody well ashamed of yourselves". He slammed the door.

"Pig!". Then we laughed, armoured by our truculence and happiness. Downstairs he pushed us out of the pub roughly. We had to don our cloaks and gloves in the cold east wind. "Bastard!". Sheri was savage, sinking her blonde head into her hood and buckling it tight. "Shall we have that brandy?". I said I'd love it. "Well, I'm a member of a club in Soho. Lets get a taxi".

Well, we had two brandies. Then walking out into Dean Street we flagged down another taxi and went home to my place. We badly needed a bath of course and so I ran one and we bathed together. I wouldn't say our main bath was as large as the one Cleopatra VII is alleged to have had but it certainly encouraged joint bathing, and that afternoon we luxuriated. It deepened our already deep friendship and I think my favourite blonde was astonished to find her sexuality more extensive than she had thought. In fact, we became quite passionate in the bath and it was delightful. Love between ladies is not as brutal as love between men and women on account of a lady's nature. Yet the rough handling one receives from men

has its own charms, I confess, the abasement, the violence appeals to a maschocist in me. But I do prefer a lady in my arms.

I allowed Sheri to busy her lips around my throat; then she whispered in my ear, with a light laugh. "These lunch-time fucks are fun, darling. Let's do it again, on a weekly basis". I told her she was naughty but said it so half-heartedly that she knew I felt as she did. "I mean" she went on, running her hand over my wet body, ending just above my sex, "men are so easy to turn on. It is childishly simple for a female to get a lover. We have the power, we are the manipulators. Fact is, Joanne, we are the sex, they are just the appendage. But it is fun letting them take us, isn't it?". I had to admit it was. "What about next Wednesday?".

I told her, no, next Wednesday mummy was coming from Kent to do some shopping and we would be busy all day. "The week after?" she suggested, in a wheedling tone. I laughed and agreed. I said, drily, I hoped she was 'on the pill'. She laughed: "What do you think, darling!? I envy you, darling, not having to bother. You're a lucky bitch". I did have to bother, but not so much as if I had been fertile.

What Sheri did not explore (although she knew them perfectly well as any female does) were the dangers implicit in what we did. The female is very vulnerable; from the day she is born she is marked down as a victim. She is easy to undress and she is easy to kill. If anyone wants to question my assertion, pick up a newspaper any day of the week in the year. Sheri and I were playing Russian roulette. We knew it in our hearts, but the risk, at that time in our lives, appeared so delectable to us, so much of a stimulation, that we could not resist it. I think, in fact, that Sheri has a death wish in that direction. However that may be - and knowing her so well I know she would have been prepared to die in combat - on one famous occasion the winds of death came very close, and I have to insist it was not really our fault.

Picture it. A cool autumn day and two ladies, booted and wearing white poplin military-style raincoats, having cut through Orange Street from the Charing Cross Road, were walking up Haymarket, bound for John Lewis in Oxford Street. It was somewhat short of one o'clock. They are approached by two men, big men, in donkey jackets. Safe in the knowledge that nothing bad could happen to us with so many people about, we get angry at the suggestions made and speak sharply, and turn on our heels; and the outrage was not simulated. We look for a Policeman; there is not one in sight. We start to hurry. Sheri looks behind her, which I had asked her not to do. "Oh, my God, they're following us!". My woman's instinct told me this was serious business. Don't ask me to explain it; a woman knows. Although we were not teenagers, and knew the score, we both panicked. We started to run. Ever tried running in spiky heels? "Turn left here, then right, and we're in Oxford Street". It Could we but make it, we could lose ourselves in the midday crowds. But we had not taken into account the evil in men towards our sex.

Rather than run after us, they had hared up an alley that ran parallel to the street we were on. Men have long legs and cover ground quickly. So, at the entrance to a mean little court they leapt out at us. Strong male arms circled our necks, choking off burgeoning screams; our arms flailed uselessly. We were in terror, the message our brains hammered at us was: "This is death!". They dragged us, half choked and tottering on our heels, into the courtyard, past a builder's skip. I saw at the far end two lock-up garages and again my instinct told me: "That's where you will be killed". Then it started.

The question was asked just once. We both gasped a negative. After that it is a bad dream. I have a vision of a snarling face and a big fist that punctuated abuse. I heard Sheri whimper, and twisting to avoid a blow saw her bent double. But the bunched hand continued to smash into me. I cried. I raised my arms to protect my face and breasts as every woman would, but still those terrible blows crucified my soft flesh.



My knees started to buckle. Then his knee came up, forcing me back against the wall. I cried out with the pain of it. I heard him laugh as if from a long way off. One more shock to my body and I went down into blessed blackness.

Looking back on this in middle age I cannot believe that in broad daylight, within a stone's throw of crowds, in our capital city, this could happen. Someone must have seen us being attacked, yet no help came, no blue uniform, no truncheon. But I ask, why do men hate women so? Why do they want to hurt us? To kill us even?

That we didn't die was our good luck. They started to strangle us, as so many millions before us, of that we are certain. It hurt us to swallow for days, and we sought medical advice. My memory is dim of what happened. Obviously we were raped but it may be that the mind blots out what it does not want to remember. I came to feeling as sick as Hell, hurting and crying in shock. I lay on a cold, concrete floor in an empty garage, like a prostitute, used and discarded by a client. Let it not be to my shame that I sobbed my heart out.

To my right I heard a lady's moan, an expletive and a stricken cry as a wounded deer might give when a hunter's magnum load smashes through it. Even as I was, my heart was moved by my comrade's pain, happy to know she was alive. I called her name croakingly.

"The bastards!" Sheri whimpered through swollen lips, "they've taken our boots". I wrinkled my toes and found she was right. "I'm hurt, Jo".

"We both are, darling". I realised my feet were cold, how protected by nothing more substantial than nylon. "I've heard of men who take a lady's boots after sex. Queers. A trophy for the victor".

"I know". She spoke with some difficulty, using her knowledge of history to comfort her in her extremity of pain. "A knight stripped of his harness, a stricken lady stripped of her boots, its all the same piece of cloth". She tried to laugh bitterly, but it ended in a gasp of pain. "Sexually exciting".

I didn't see it that way. Sheri had spunk. I'd always known that. Bully for Brynmawr and Michigan University I thought. But it didn't help us get out of there. I told her so. She said she didn't think she could make it. I said she had to, and she said she'd try. I was hurt around the body, bruised. Every time I breathed I could feel it. I tried to rise, but fell back. "Well" I moaned, "we aren't strangled. We'll live to fight again".

From where I lay I could look down the yard to the builder's skip that stood there. Something black peeped over the top. I had a flare of hope. "I think maybe.....just maybe they've thrown our boots in the skip, the swine".

I helped Sheri then, inspected her wound. It wasn't deep but it had bled copiously. What was worse was that her blonde hair lay in a pool of oil. I told her and she murmured something basic. "Never mind" I said, "we'll go to the salon together". She appeared comforted.

By main force I got her up. I think she was in a sorrier state than I was. We clung to each other for a while then supporting each other we padded down the yard. I propped her against a wall while I inspected the skip. I could have cried in joy. I had to get in to rescue our footwear but the spiky heel of one of my showgirl boots had caught in a bit of wire, which held it near the top. I rolled out of the skip, to the detriment of my coat. It was ruined anyway. There was a pile of planks nearby. We sat down and slid our legs into the protective leather. Sheri was near tears. "I feel like a lady again" she whispered gratefully. I knew how she felt. As well as being footwear, fashion boots are the emblem of our sex. "Joanne" she murmured, suddenly, with something of her old humour, "you've got a peach of a black eye. Never keep that from Harry".

I fingered the eye tenderly. "I'd like to go after those pigs with a gun in my hand, wouldn't you?".

"If the world was as it ought to be, that is, a matriarchy" Sheri responded savagely, "I'd go with you, paying calls. As it is, dear friend, it being a man's world, we write it off as a hazard of being a lady".

So it had to be. Two battered ladies hailed a taxi and once in it my friend moaned distressfully causing me great worry, but she admitted we were lucky it was no worse. Bruises heal. They go black, they go yellow, then clear; but a cracked rib, such as Sheri turned out to have, is something else. I handed her over to her staff, kissed her and went home to nurse my own hurts.

When Harry saw my eye he nearly went crazy; and when he saw my body bruises even more so. He was all set to ring the Police. I read him the female Riot Act.

"Don't you know why women never go to the Police when they are raped and beaten? Because the Police always think we've asked for it. Then our private parts are examined, the snide lawyers in Court making us feel dirty.....no, Harry, rape is an occupational hazard for a lady. Its brutal, its traumatic and other things. But forget it. I have, Sheri has. A friend in Kent was daft enough to go to Court over it. Know what the Judge asked her? Did she wear tight clothes. Of course she did, every lady does, to accentuate her charms. And the rapist got off because of what the Judge called 'provocation'. So the victim became the guilty party and because she couldn't take the humiliation, she took an overdose. I'm not going down that road. So back off, Harry".

"Not easy to be female, is it?".

I laughed without humour. "Not easy, Harry. According to men, we're not made in God's image. We're nothing, just vehicles of pleasure. We're second class citizens".

He said he wanted me that night. I told him to forget it.

Naturally, between Sheri and I there followed a hiatus for she was in hospital for a month, and I was in bed for two weeks. My doctor wanted me to be hospitalised likewise but I had Harry to think of. I did have an x-ray and in my case it was merely bruises and contusions.

I saw a lot of Cathie about this time. At that time she had a puss named Angela, a gentle girl. They lived in Swiss Cottage and after High Mass at the Brompton Oratory one Sunday we drove over for lunch. Cathie looked great in a white, frilly blouse, tight stretch pants and patent leather boots. Angie knew she was only a stopgap because Cathie had to have a puss. I knew Cathie loved Francoise. One day Cathie said: "She'll come crawling back one day, as you will. Marriage? You both must be mad. You're both gay at bottom". So Angie knew she was passing through but made the most of her good fortune.

We left about three and as we drove home, Harry mused: "You've got a good friend there, I'd say. When Cathie gives her friendship its something worth having. Courage and loyalty, thats Catherine".

Then Harry became involved in take-over proceedings, making an offer for a competing firm in Hampshire; he was successful. This involved him in a lot of extra work and I became worried. Even Cathie became anxious over the proliferation of conferences and meetings. "He's going to kill himself" I wailed down the phone at her.

"Well, he wants to go in harness" she replied quietly. "And we do need that company. It makes us pre-eminent in the field. Don't forget your proxy helped to clinch it. In the name of God, don't rock the boat at this stage". So I didn't but one night I had to call the doctor to Harry. I thought that night would be his last but he survived, and at my tearful entreaties did ease off, delegating the donkey work to Cathie. The doctor, as he left shaking his head, "Ring me at any time, Mrs.Cartwright".



I went back to Harry. He was watching television, seemingly unconcerned: "Did you have to get him in?"

"I thought it necessary".

He was quiet for a moment, then he took my hand. "You've been good to me, Jo and for me. It was a red letter day when I found you".

"If you say so, Harry".

Suddenly his Berkshire ancestors rose up in him. "They say the dying can see further into a millstone than most". His eyes flickered up to mine. "I can see great happiness for you in the future. Don't ask me how I know, but I do. Just hold on. When I'm not here any longer, lean on Cathie. I know she's fond of you and she's like a rock". I promised I would. "You know what I do regret?".

"No, Harry, how could I?".

"All those years ago when I first saw you at that party at Frant. I wish I'd had the courage of my convictions. You attracted me then".

"So I saw" I murmured, smiling. "Why didn't you speak. A girl only knows when a man asks her".

"God knows. I was with Cathie, maybe that was one reason. Then, I was just starting up, working all hours. I had nothing much to offer you. And you were - what is it your father called it - a lady of coat armour and I came from a Berkshire cottage.....".

"Fool!" I whispered.

"Now, when I have plenty to offer you, I'm finished. Isn't life a bloody farce?".

Well, I thought so too. I lay awake watching him for a long time. I cried a little. I didn't want to lose him but I knew I would, quite soon.

In the morning, wonder of wonders, he didn't go to the office. Then, mid-morning, just as I was ringing Sheri, the stuff from Atomage came. Harry got quite excited. "Down, boy!" I laughed. "After lunch, if you'll take your medication, I'll put it on for you".

So I did, and I must confess I got almost as much of a rise out of wearing it as he did seeing me in it. "Honor Blackman" says he, "eat your heart out!". It was certainly a nice feeling, completely enclosed; looking out through the eyepiece of the helmet I felt like a knight in armour! I knew what effect it would have on Sheri, with her love of history. The suit was very warm and cosy but I knew I could never wear it out, much too dangerous. This was closet stuff. Then I changed into the vinyl suit, crackling erotically for him. It was a fun afternoon for both of us.

Three weeks later he was dead. I didn't have the horror of seeing his lifeless eyes. I was spared that. It fell on Cathie's capable shoulders. I dont think I could have coped. Maybe the Supreme Deity knew that and was merciful to both of us.

The telephone rang at 4.30 p.m one cool, autumn day. Cathie was clearly upset. "Darling" she said, lowly, "its happened at last. I heard a noise and rushed into his office. One thing, it was quick, he knew nothing".

"Oh, God!". I felt tears pricking my eyelids.

"Now, don't go to pieces. Everything's been attended to. Harry is in the morgue. I've even cabled his sister. But we must talk, you and I. I'll come straight over from the office".

"Bless you, Cathie".

When she came I could see how distressed she was. "Not the first corpse I've seen. Not nice though. Why is it always the good ones who go? Men

aren't my favourite kind of cattle as you know, but Harry was special. I altered my plans to help him, also as you know. I'd not have done it for any other man. But now there's you to think of. You'll need my help. Nobody is going to hurt you while I'm around". I had once thought her feelings for me were casual, now I could see I was wrong. She squeezed my hand in comradeship.

"Yes, he was a good man".

"That's for sure". She was a trifle absent and I could see she had something on her mind. "Joanne, his sister flies in tomorrow evening and the funeral has been arranged for Tuesday in his Berkshire parish. That's been put in hand. Harry, bless him, wasn't afraid of death. God knows he'd lived with it long enough. He'd briefed me very thoroughly on what to do. Sorry if this sounds ghoulish but he was a methodical fellow. And now there's you".

I looked at her. "He told me to lean on you".

"So lean, my dear" she responded eagerly, "I want you to". Within me something stirred, nothing much you understand, just a stimulatory twinge. "But its his sister, Mary. Harry foresaw the difficulties. I don't like saying this about a member of our sex, but she's a hard case, a real bitch". I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, dont get me wrong. Your legal position is unassailable but she'll be nasty. I want you prepared. And I think its better if I sleep here tonight. Or you can come to me; we've room. I mean this is the bed you shared" - she jerked her head behind her - and I don't think you're hard enough to face that on your own. Not this night anyway". In fact I was glad of her company.

There was a knock at the door, and Thomas came in, asking if we needed anything. Actually, he'd heard about Harry and I thought this as good a time as any to get things rolling. "Ah, Thomas" I murmured, "you've no doubt heard from the housekeeper, right?

"Yes, madam".

"I should give some thought to the future, Thomas. Things will have to change here. I shall not be needing a valet, you understand?".

"The skids are under me, madam. Yes, I understand".

"I'll see you don't suffer, Thomas".

"Thank you, madam".

After he'd gone, Cathie smiled. "He hates you, did you know? And now I come to think of it, Mary appears to know almost everything about what goes on here, about you, about Sheri Masters.....it wouldn't surprise me if that bastard is Mary's eyes and ears".

"I'd say that is a reasonable deduction" I agreed, drily.

She comforted me for the rest of that evening and night. Woman-like she flipped over my wardrobes. "Christ!" she muttered. Then she inspected my jewel case. I picked up a handful and scattered them on the table. "My God, Joanne, you're a bit offhand with those sparklers, aren't you?".

"A hedge against inflation".

"Some hedge".

While we drank coffee she asked what I was wearing to the funeral. I shrugged. "Well, we're in the middle of a cold snap. I'll wear the sable with matching hat. And thigh boots. I suffer acutely in this weather".

"That should protect you effectively" she decided gravely. "I'll wear something similar. His sister, coming from a hot climate, probably wont have anything suitable. She'll freeze! Nothing infuriates a woman like being upstaged sartorially".

"Won't it make her even more hostile to me?".



Cathie hefted the coffee pot, smiling wickedly: "Naturally. But who cares? You have to mix it with her kind, just to establish yourself as an adversary to be respected. And this one is a cow. You'll have to rub her nose in it. Don't forget you're holding all the cards".

"She's not like Harry in any way?".

"Don't insult Harry! She's a hard case, that one. She no doubt thought she'd inherit everything. Then Harry married you. She's got the cottage in Berkshire and she's got the business. And no way is she going to sack me when she takes over. I'm moving on voluntarily. On the phone she told me there would be changes. A nudge is as good as a wink to a blind man".

"You're resigning?".

"Given a month's notice. But if she wants me out earlier, I'll go. No fuss".

I was appalled. "I'll miss you".

"Hell! I haven't forgotten my promise to Harry. You don't know me very well if you think I would". She caressed my face. "I'm going to look after you".

"I want to know you better, much better".

"You will, believe it. Its in our stars. I am going to reclaim you from your present courses". Then, as I went scarlet, she laughed. "Oh yes, I know what you and Sheri Masters do. Its disgusting. And no doubt you do stuff I don't know about". I thanked God she didn't know about Herman.

"How did you know about Sheri and I?" I asked lowly.

"Hell! The Masters woman is wellknown. Harry liked her; she amused him. I never liked her. She runs these orgiastic parties. A depraved woman. Rich but depraved".

"Go easy, Cathie. She's my friend".

"More's the pity. But I admire your spunk in defending her. Now, when you're angry, your eyes flash delightfully! You, I and Fran - we're going to be a great team".

She returned to the subject later. "Keep in touch with Fran. I'm going to the States for a while after the funeral. I'll give you an address in Los Angeles where you can write to me".

"Your old haunts?".

"That's it. I'm going to raise a bit of Hell while I still can. I joined Harry because he asked me to, because of friendship. But now its over, I have a hankering for the fleshpots of California". She took my hand. "No hope of you coming with me, I suppose? Ah no, your parents of course. Pity. Such a lot to show you. But we'll be together one day".

So Tuesday came and I looked a picture, slim legs sheathed in gleaming leather and swathed in sable. Cathie's eyes exhibited the lesbian hunger I have come to know so well. Lovely and cossetted as I was, I feared nobody, not even the redoubtable Mary.

I drove Cathie down in the Bentley, while Thomas, the chauffeur, took the Mercedes to convey the housekeeper, and Mary. Cathie had booked her in at the Ritz in Piccadilly; I didn't want to meet her until I had to.

As we drove west, I discovered a bit about Cathie's past which she had never mentioned. I asked her if she had many friends in California. "Some. I used to work for a detective agency, you know".

"You?". This incredulously.

"Yes, me. Just leg work. Why not?".

"Hardly work for a lady, surely?".

"You dear old-fashioned thing! There's work a woman is cut out for".

"Ah!". I was silent.

She laughed. "I've shocked you".

"Hardly. You say you know what Sheri and I get up to".

"There were eight women I knew about working with agencies, probably more had I known. Then one night there were seven. We formed ourselves into the 38 Club for mutual help. A detective agency over there isn't quite what it is over here".

I was puzzled. "The 38 Club? But you said.....".

"Dear soul! It doesn't refer to the number of us. It refers to our gun calibre!". I blinked. "Yes, I always used a Smith & Wesson Centennial myself. No spur to catch in the clothing. Some of them used a Colt Cobra with hammer shroud, but I always stuck with the Centennial, usually with a Berns Martin inside pants holster. I never liked under-skirt holsters. They wasted valuable seconds. Or I used a shoulder holster like the men, notwithstanding my boobs".

"Sounds dangerous".

"Well" she murmured judiciously, "it could get hairy. I've been slugged more than once, and raped. I was shot once. You've seen the scar. That was what persuaded me to get out. I didn't need a skyscraper to fall on me. After that I came back to England. Still, I'd had two very full and exciting years. The poor bitch who died wasn't that lucky. Some bastard put a shotgun to her belly and fired. Both barrels".

I shuddered. "I hope you're not going back to that life. Or we'll never get together with Fran".

"Hell, no! That kind of race is to the young. I was fresh out of Vassar at the time. As you get older your reactions slow. It would be suicide and thats not my style. No, I'm only going to look up old friends. Like Carrie. She worked the rodeo circuit for a time, you know, cow-girl stuff, all Justin boots and chaps. Then she joined the roller-skate circuit. Not nice, that. But she was tough, just right for the agency".

"She still in it?".

"No, she married. They run a motel near Austin, Texas. I get a card at Christmas".

It was while I w as digesting all this that she told me to look out for the Lambourn signpost. The village we wanted was not far from Lambourn.

There was blue sky over the Berkshire Downs but it was cold, with a nasty cold wind. I mentally thumbed my nose at the wind, knowing it would be impotent against what I was wearing. Cathie looked as grand as I did; we both created an impression on the undertakers and the young Vicar. We were enjoying all this when the Mercedes drew up behind my Bentley.

"Don't look round" Cathie murmured, "I'll brief you. Ah yes, Thomas, the housekeeper and Mary". She chuckled. "I told you so. We score, darling, we score. Court shoes, no hat and a long South American poncho, Peruvian I'd say. Unsuitable but good quality. She's going to be perished, and serve the cow right". She came abreast of us; I turned, smiling graciously. We shook hands politely, man-fashion, while she scrutinised me minutely, and with some hostility. I will now describe this personage.

She was tall, but nature had not treated her kindly. Her complexion was bad, and she looked the quintessential career woman, hard as nails. Her face showed all the evidence of a woman who had spent her lifetime knocking her head against brick walls and finding a way round. Third Secretary, is she, I thought. Well, fate has been kinder to me than you. And to think she was Harry's sister.

We were a small group around the grave and when Harry's coffin was lowered, I desperately wanted to cry. I opened my handbag and clutched my



handkerchief. Sheri looked at me compassionately and Cathie took my hand. Thomas's eyes seemed to mock me, as he watched me dabbing my eyes. Mary's eyes were chips of flint and I wondered what they had brewed for me on the way down from London. I had no reason to fear, that much was certain; my future was tied up in the marriage agreement and Harry's Will. And why should Mary complain? Potentially she'd be rich, and she did have their family's home.

We were getting into the Bentley when Mary approached us, teeth nearly chattering with the cold. "I'd like to see you at the house when we get back to London".

"Very well".

Sheri kissed me, with words of comfort, before getting into her dark blue Jaguar and roaring off. In the car Cathie turned to me with a grim smile. "This is it, pet. The crunch. The O.K Corral. And its down to you. I've handed in my notice. I was only an employee anyway. This is your fight. Of course, I'll be there for moral support, but really its down to you. But you've got all the advantages - looks, clothes, breeding, the whole upper-class bit. If you come out less than even stevens I'll be disappointed in you".

I got the point. Our future relationship depended to some extent on my showing in this confrontation. Well, if this is what it took to earn Cathie's respect, I'd do my damndest. I wouldn't give an inch. I was proud of what I had contributed to Harry's last months. Cathie nodded when I told her. "That's the way to play it, darling. Don't take any cheek from her. You are the wife. While she was playing diplomat in South America, you were bearing the heat and burden of the day, looking after Harry, creating a caring environment for him. She'll twit you with deviation; throw it back in her face. If you need my help, its yours. But I want you to come through on your own".

They were at the house before me. Thomas and Sheri had got through before a pesky herd of cows had made me jam on the brakes. I had lost a little advantage there but I was buoyed up by some strange determination like a knight entering the lists. I literally stalked into the drawing room, Cathie was to say, admiringly, eager for battle. Mary was equally anxious to lock horns. She waited until the drinks had been poured, and we were standing there, sipping our sherry. Then she jumped right in. "I never thought Harry would marry a deviant. No accounting for men's taste, is there?".

She wanted to embarrass me before the housekeeper and Thomas. I was not having that. This bitch must learn who she was dealing with. "This is a family matter" I stated coldly. "I do not propose to discuss it before domestics".

It was arrogant, it was nasty. To my left I heard what sounded suspiciously like an imperfectly suppressed chuckle. Thomas and the housekeeper glared at me and I felt the knives pierce my body. I should have crumpled. Thomas opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it, no doubt thinking about his severance pay. I raked him with cold eyes and he subsided.

Taken aback, Mary rasped: "I suppose that's fair", jerking her head with the words. She was ordering my staff out, in my own house! That I could not permit.

"Stop that! Any orders in this house will be given by me". Then I waved my hand, imperiously, dismissing them. They went, glaring. "And I will see you later". I fully intended to dismiss them on the spot.

Mary grinned: "You're a vicious little beast aren't you?".

"This is my house and you will remember it, Mary, and do not presume".

That made her mad. "You're just a dirty little gold-digger. And a lousy pervert into the bargain. And to think Harry bedded with you!".

Hotly I defended myself. "He bedded with me, as you put it, because he loved me and wanted me, and I loved him, and provided him with a caring environment in his last months. And where were you? As to being a gold-digger, you are a liar".

"Am I so?" she flared, "you get everything as I understand. I know about the marriage agreement and the disposal of the estate. They tell me I cannot contest either in the Courts. Very well. But you are rich in your own right".

"You are potentially rich too" I pointed out, "I know nothing about the business - I left that to my husband - but I'm told it is highly thought of, and much sought by an American conglomerate".

"That's none of your business. I still say you're a gold-digger, selling yourself for money, money that should have been mine".

"You lie. It is true Harry was generous. He gave me many gifts. He was that kind of man. He made me a shareholder, he made me a Director.....".

The colour drained from her face. "He did what?" she shrilled.

"You heard what I said very well".

"I want that Directorship" she bellowed.

"Try to get it!".

She downed her sherry glass. It should have warned me, but I was still a novice.

"I'm not having any lousy pervert on the Board, and a papist one at that" she grated.

I got really mad, feeling the heat flow over me. The insults were vile and personal. I stepped forward and slapped her face: "You cow!".

She swayed, eyes bulging. Now, you must understand her hand was harder and larger than mine. Cathie said it sounded like the crack of a gun. I reeled back, a table stopping me falling but my sherry glass went flying from my left hand. Our blood was racing and we went for each other with savage joy. Cathie threw herself between us, proud but concerned. "Stop it, darling" she whispered, "you can't win". She was right of course. I would have ended up sleeping on the carpet but I'm not sure that it would not have been worth it, just to hurt her, even if I had been hurt likewise.

"I still want that Directorship".

Over Cathie's shoulder I riposted: "You'll have to fight me for it".

"What had you in mind?" Mary sneered, "pistols at dawn?".

"I think" Cathie flung at her, coolly, "Mrs.Cartwright means an exchange of solicitors' names. They'll do any fighting necessary".

"If she's agreeable, I am".

I was too sensible not to grab that way out. "Of course, I'm agreeable". I put Cathie aside. "And get out of my house. And take your hirelings with you. I'll send their money on".

The door slammed behind them and Cathie took me in her arms: "My God, what a bird you are! I'm fast losing my heart to you. You're the right kind of puss for a woman like me. The way you went in there. I'm proud of you, Jo".

It was a mite embarrassing, though warming. I wasn't ready to be her puss, not then. She didn't know and I couldn't tell her, but in three days Herman would be in London and I had a commitment to honour. So I kissed her, asking her to help me choose some new staff. I'd want a maid/chauffeuse and a housekeeper. Never again would I have permanent male staff. From now on this would be Themiscyra and I Penthesilea!



So it happened in fact. With Cathie's help I found a splendid housekeeper, a Mrs.Arkwright, and a maid/chauffeuse called Barbara. The housekeeper could hire any help she wanted. Barbara was to stay with me until her marriage, just before I emigrated to France to live with Cathie, Fran, Eve and Jeanne.

I had to see Mary once more - at the reading of the will. She was tight-lipped and grim. We did not speak. She hated me and I hated her. Mary stared straight ahead through the window behind the solicitor's head. One person I didn't expect to see there was Priscilla Hunt, Harry's secretary, a rather brazen little blonde, who could not meet my eyes. Cathie whispered: "Services rendered". Cathie knew more than she was saying. Miss Hunt did very well at £5,000 for her co-operation. Cathie received £10,000 for her loyalty over the years. Nobody could cavil at that. Mary, as we knew, got the family home and the business; I got the London house and everything else. I had no idea Harry owned so much property - there was a schedule one and a half foolscap pages long - and when we were alone I asked Cathie about the origin of all this real estate.

"Harry's father was a commercial traveller for a firm of agricultural suppliers - cattle cake and all that - just after the first world war. As he went around Berkshire he found farmers were hard up. He loaned them money at interest. With the proceeds he bought property which was cheap then. And he did this right up till 1939. Then he rented a lot of the property to the armed forces so you can imagine he made a killing. Then after 1945 house prices rocketed. I'd say" says she, looking at the list, "you must be close to having a cool million at your beck".

This made me more sympathetic to Mary's rage. Her expectations had been very reasonable. I wondered if I should make some kind of restitution, at which Cathie got angry. "You must not do anything so stupid. Its spitting in Harry's face. He wanted it this way. Mary will be rich enough when she sells the business. She's worked for thirty years. She has a pension, index-linked too. Don't feel sorry for her, for God's sake. And don't sell the properties. Houses are bound to appreciate in price".

I even made Mary pay through the nose for the Directorship, and sold my stock. I wanted to cut adrift from the whole thing. When I was just congratulating myself on my good fortune, Cathie flew off to America.

"I'll write" she assured me, with emotion. "And you'll write, won't you?". I kissed her, very near tears. "And when I get back.....". The sentence was sweet, even though unfinished. I knew what she had in mind. She turned on her heel and hurried through the gateway. As her plane roared down the runway. I held my handkerchief to my mouth and fled.

Of course, I wasn't too alone. There was Sheri with whom to go on the rampage (and we did!) and every so often Herman would fly in and there would be an afternoon of dalliance, followed by a meal at a West End restaurant.

Yet I look back on this time with shame. I was a very bad woman, I freely admit. I was too rich, too contemptuous of morality. I was sinking quite happily into a sink of iniquity that exists on the fringes of society, luxurious but sinful. My standards had sunk alarmingly. I went completely off the rails and became a whore, a Mayfair whore it is true, but still a whore, a call girl, a 'fille de joie'. How it happened you shall now hear, and how I received my truly merited come-uppance, which finally brought me to my senses just in time to save me from complete depravity.

SHERI AND I



This is a hard chapter to write, nor do I understand why it happened. Yet happen it did. Perhaps when one cannot fulfil one's feminine duty and produce life, something else happens to one. My sexual ambivalence was obvious. I could join with Cathie in condemning men as animals and predators, and then, immediately a man whispers sweet insincerities in my ear, crawl into bed with him and find no inconsistency in so doing. I could go to bed with Cathie, and enjoy every minute of it, then rush to Heathrow to meet Herman's plane. Cathie knew how it was with me and grieved, but she considered it something I had to get out of my system. Perhaps she was right.

I know now that Sheri led me, unprotesting, down this road. I adored my American friend, with her soft blonde hair, her good conversation, her gallantry, her wit, her education and her gilded existence. Yet even I was horrified when one day I watched her kill a man with no more regret than if she had swotted a fly.

Sheri's knowledge of London equalled that of a taxi driver; so, one day when we were shopping in Soho, wanting Shaftesbury Avenue and she said: "This alley is a short cut", I did not question it. The alley was very narrow and ran, I think, behind some restaurants - or perhaps I should say greasy spoons, judging from the decaying cabbage leaves we trod on. We were three-quarters of the way down when the alley did a sharp turn and round the corner we came face to face with a young, large black man, cleaning his nails with a wicked looking knife. Seeing us, he grinned, peeling himself off the wall. I saw his leer and my heart sank. I had visions of the white envelope of my body being cut open and was plainly terrified.

"Lets 'ave yer money, or I'll cut you up. I like slicing broads!".

I'll always remember how he was dressed. A leather jacket (cheap) over a T shirt, with lots of gold chains around his neck, jeans, and Western style boots with gold studs. Both of us, Sheri and I, opened our handbags. I reached for my bill-fold. I expected Sheri to do the same, but instead of money she produced a nickel-plated Browning .25 automatic. I saw the man's eyes dilate in fright. There was an explosive cough, the knife clattered on the ground and he gripped his stomach.

I leapt back. I had seen something gleam on his fingers. As I watched in horror, I saw the blood spurt, then stream over the black fingers. A plaintive groan issued out of his mouth. "White trash!" was all he gasped before he went down.

Sheri looked at me with a smile. "Don't you dare scream, Jo" she advised, gripping my arm, "he was only a nigger".

We stepped over him and went on our way. She replaced her gun and dismissed the matter from her mind. She told me not to hurry, to act naturally. I was appalled.

"Sheri, that was murder!".

"That it was" she nodded, "but I couldn't let your lovely body be cut up could I? Or my own, for that matter. It was justifiable homicide. Anyway, dont worry. The cops - even British cops - don't worry too much about a shine killing. They know we've too many nig-nogs over here as it is. One less wont hurt anyone". She laughed. "Save on dole money".

This was appalling. I told her so, seated in her drawing room, drinking tea and eating chocolate eclairs. I was still white around the gills but she was quite unperturbed.

"Won't they be able to trace the gun?".

"Honey, now really". She went off into peels of laughter. "You dont imagine the gun is registered, do you? Thats not for the likes of you and I. I've carried a gun ever since our little shindig just off the Haymarket. I've got one for you too, not a custom Browning; I couldn't get one

at short notice. But I've got you a nickel-plated .25 Astra Firecat from Guernica. Friend of mine.....er.....smuggled it in for you. No, no, my gift to a brave comrade". I handled the pretty little ladies gun with mixed emotions. I suppose proud but scared would cover it. I raised troubled eyes to hers, thanking her. "Now, I'm not going to say its a manstopper; but with accurate placement it'll kill, as you saw this afternoon. Its really a close quarter weapon, just **right** for a lady. I must impress on you, Joanne, ladies who live as we live must go armed. That you did not worried me. The Haymarket affair was too close for comfort and no bastard is going to get that close to taking my life again".

"And ammunition?".

"I'll give you a box before you go" and she did. "And I'll tell you who got it for you. Cathie; yes, your friend Cathie. I've had it for some time but I wanted to have it customised for you, engraved I mean". I asked her how Cathie came into it. "Joanne, you really are innocent. I thought you knew. You don't think your lifestyle with Harry came out of a tuppenny-halfpenny light engineering firm, did you? Hell, Joanne, your Harry was in the arms business, a middle-man. That was what he was doing in Spain, negotiating a deal. Hence your Firecat".

I sat there open-mouthed. I was shocked. That Harry should have been in that trade repelled me and yet I swallowed the information without too much of a tremor. "Good God! Harry. I never knew".

"Well, I guess that knowing your background he thought what you didn't know wouldn't hurt you". She took me in her arms and kissed me. "I knew you were one of us at heart. Cathie told me on the phone you had hidden depths. You handled that nigger quite well too. I thought you'd be hysterical but you weren't. Your first, I think?".

"My first".

"Believe me, darling, when you're back is against the wall, you'll kill. If you don't, you're a dead lady. Joanne, let me educate you. If you'd stayed in your Kent village nothing more exciting would have happened than the butcher running off with the postmistress. If you want excitement you have to go out and lug it in by the ears. That's our style, isn't it, lunch-time fucks and all?".

I laughed and she with me. "Yes, you've got my number, Sheri. The moment I met you at that dinner party I knew we were destined to ride together". Again a comradely hug. "I see now that business this afternoon was last ditch stuff. And what does it matter really? One hated man has bitten the dust, so what?".

"And you won't hear any more about it, believe me". Nor did I. It wasn't even in the Daily Telegraph the morning after.

She taught me how to load the gun, pushing slugs into the clip and then pushing it home. Now I recognise I had stepped over that boundary into that twilight world wherein only a lady with low standards can survive. My next step away from the light came two weeks afterwards. I was at ease in bed. Barbara had brought my breakfast and my dark head looked fine against the pink lace pillow. I was idly opening my mail when the telephone rang. I leaned over and flicked the receiver from the cradle. It was Sheri. "Want an evening of booze and sex, darling?".

"Sounds fun" I gurgled.

"My parties always are. But be warned, Jo, it'll be rough. A lovely lady like you is bound to get laid. Fact is, my dear, there's this guy George, a friend of mine, says he's seen you with Harry, and lusted after you ever since. Says he's going to rape you. How d'you feel about that?!".

"Promises, promises!" I giggled.

"Knew you were a gallant lady. Wear that silver lame sheath dress, with the silver evening boots. It'll drive the men mad!".



Actually, Sheri had truncated the description of this shattering item. It also had above the elbow gloves and a hooded cloak to go with it. My cabbie boggled enough, surveying me in the driving mirror; and when he set me down at Sheri's and I had paid and tipped him, he grinned: "Blimey, luv, I bet you're expensive!" and shot off before I could think of a suitable reply. It was this that irritated me and triggered the deplorable incident of the evening.

The first thing that I saw when I entered Sheri's spacious if overly grand drawing room was the lady herself, dressed in red and black cire if I remember rightly. Anyway it was shiny, a real eye-catcher. The trousers were in the Turkish style with little boots on one hundred millimetre heels. The top was likewise black but with red adornments. A coat came with it of the same material, with an absurdly high collar (right up to the occiput in fact) and it had a train. With her blonde hair swept up onto her head, she was something to see. We kissed and I asked her **where**. . she got that little number. She laughed and told me I looked wonderful, which I did, and that she wanted to introduce me to George. At this point I took one further step into the twilight zone, though I didn't know it then.

I suppose there must have been thirty couples there, all young. I was as amused as Cathie must have been at Frant at the antics of Fran and myself. For everyone of those girls had their tongues hanging out for adventure, praying that the worst would happen to them. I whispered as much to Sheri, who nodded: "Of course, darling. That's what we're here for". Then she introduced me to George.

A tall, broad shouldered man was George, not bad looking, fair-haired; his grip made me rise up on tiptoe. "Sorry" he grinned, looking me over acquisitively as men do. My dark hair, impeccably groomed, against silver is a potent sight to any red-blooded male; and my eminently visible bosoms (of which I was inordinately proud) guaranteed that not only George but other men should flock around me. Ah well, I thought, come one, come all. George paid out the rope, permitting me to mingle. I took that kindly. I fenced verbally with the men present, enjoying it all, perhaps too much. The young women glared at me, one especially. Men appropriated wine for me every time a waiter passed; I knew what they were doing and didn't care a damn. Anyway, a grinning George was always in attendance. He evidently did intend to rape me.

Then something happened that, looking back on it, I am sorry for; but in reality it is every woman for herself. There was this small blonde, bristling with injury, pushed her way up to me, and stood, quivering with rage, her breasts nearly touching mine. I gave her a haughty stare, which made her madder. She accused me of stealing her man. Smiling I said if she couldn't hold on to him, it was her fault not mine. She boiled afresh, telling me, as if I didn't know, that everything about me offended her - my stupid, upper-class voice, my face (which she'd love to spoil), my clothes, my hair (which she'd have great joy in tearing out at the roots) and if I didn't leave her man alone she'd do all of those things.

The room fell quiet, punctuated by the giggles of the girls. The men were silent, grinning, because men love to see two women being nasty to each other. I regarded her carefully, transferring my glass from right to left hand. She was quite well-dressed, a simple black number and courts; but she was plainly East End trying to be West End, and since I never know when to back off, I stirred it up.

"My dear" I drawled, "those clothes can't hide your working class origins. You really must not be rude to your betters or I shall have to chastise you".

It was unforgiveable of course, rude and nasty. There were intakes of breath from the men, and I smiled inwardly. The women were plainly asking each other why the woman didn't take that toffee-nosed bitch apart.

Sheri, wickedly smiling in anticipation, stilled her creaking magnificence to watch the fun. I knew the girl would take a swing at me; she'd have to or lose all credibility. I even wanted her to. She did, telegraphing her intention; it was no bother to me. I bent one knee and threw her over my shoulder. Screeching, she hit the floor with a thud, while I raised my sherry to my lips before turning round to look at my handiwork. Sheri led the applause, then kissed me excitedly on the cheek.

Someone said: "She asked for it".

"And she sure as Hell got it!" Sheri carolled.

I said nothing, I knew better, relying on male psychology. They adore a woman who can fight. I turned my back on the sleeping blonde.

"Christ!" George grunted, obviously impressed, "you deserve a drink after that".

I took the proferred glass, staring down curiously at the now whimpering blonde bit. Nobody seemed anxious to go to her help, so the young man she'd had the sand to fight for dragged her away, glaring at me. I gave a little shrug and turned to George, laughing. As I sipped the wine he'd handed me, his face became a blur and the room gyrated madly.

The next thing I knew was that I was laying naked on a black silk bed and George was already in me. He hadn't removed my boots; he was one of those! "You stupid bitch" he laughed, "you've missed the best bit!". Later, Sheri told me he'd caught me as I fell and swung me on to his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I believe it. He'd intended to have me, and did. This was not a fuck I enjoyed. I had been drugged, my head pounded, but I did my womanly duty.

Bitterly I conceded mentally what every woman knows. Beauty is a snare, and the more we enhance it, the more our danger. I enjoyed being a lady but I had to accept that it was a man's world, and the only way a female can be safe from animals is to live in a fortress with her own kind.

I thought he was going to eat me. It was no use jerking my head. He was everywhere. Women forget how strong men are, but forget it at their peril. I forced myself to lay passively while he went on with his business. I barely heard what he said, except that he called me a delicious little bitch. Men are boringly uninventive. This was the downside of a woman's life.

The rest of the night is a blur. I know he mounted me several times and at one time, to my disgust, lust assailed me. I wasn't just doing my duty as a courtesan, I really wanted the swine. I gripped his buttocks. "That's better!" he laughed. He seemed always to be hard, inexhaustible. I marvelled, moaned, drifted away but always came back to martyrdom. I knew Cathie's nose would wrinkle with distaste, accuse me of rutting like an animal, and she was right, I knew.

Then once when I recovered, I was alone. The swine had left me to face the gray dawn alone. I checked the Omega on my wrist. It was something short of four in the morning. Fitful light was stealing in at the window. I had suffered all night. I cried, not because he'd gone but because I was a lady who had been raped, robbed of her pride and dignity. There is something shattering in knowing you are just a thing, a piece of meat useful for only one thing. I cursed him hysterically, and with him, all men. I screamed: "Bastard.....bastard.....bastard!" to the unanswering walls.

I heard the bedroom door open. I was sobbing too much to look up. It closed again quietly. I wept in self-contempt. It was my own fault. I had gone knowing I would be laid. So what was I complaining about? I thought suddenly of my ancestresses, who had wallowed in gallantry judging from my bastard-peppered family tree. The memory of my caste made me feel better, a soothing ointment for my degraded spirit.



I wandered into the bathroom, cleaned myself as well as I could. Returning I bent down for my dress, where it had been tossed, and wriggled into it, smoothing it over my hips. I didn't cross to the mirror. I felt I looked a mess, make-up ruined, tear-stained, and I didn't want it confirmed. I badly wanted my evening bag, with comb and compact. I peered out of the door.

At the end of the corridor there was a man, sitting on a chair, reading a paper. Seeing me, he dropped it, and came down the passage. From other rooms I heard high-pitched laughter and a few sobs. Immersed in my own degradation, I didn't care. "Can I help you, Miss?". It was bored, formal, a servant doing his duty. I said I wanted my cloak and bag. He led the way. We came to the top of the lovely elliptical staircase. Here was the first shock waiting for me.

Sheri lay there, on her back, mouth open, breathing stertorously, sleeping the sleep of the unrighteous. Her little boots were off, as were the shiny trousers; the top was up around her neck and a fair-haired man had his head between her tits, snoring likewise. Sheri looked inelegant but not unhappy. She still wore the coat with the high collar. Suddenly my wit found me.

"Urgent desire and swift fulfilment, I suppose".

"Probably, Madam".

"Is it always like this at these parties?".

"Invariably, Madam".

I wondered if he'd had one of the maids. Probably. I didn't dare to ask.

At the turn in the stairs I had the second shock. I had smelt the stale tobacco and booze, but that wasn't the worst part. The large room was like a battlefield. Girls had been overtaken by male lust where they had fallen. It was unpleasant to see. Over in the corner a girl was moaning distressfully, while a young man snored, quite worn out. God, but it was disgusting. But what right had I to put on a show of Catholic morality. I had wallowed in the muck myself. I spared the girl a pitying glance; she was a sister after all, a warrior in the war that never ends.

Between me and the door lay a semi-naked girl, giggling, clutching a wine bottle in her left hand. She raised it in triumph before putting it to her lips. I found it repellent, especially as her right hand caressed the head of her trouser-less escort. I couldn't walk around her, so I stepped over her. As I looked down at the glazed eyes, the sweaty, battle-stained face, she hiccoughed, then laughed.

I found my cloak and bag. I combed my hair and put on my face, restoring George's inroads. I felt the solidity of the loaded Astra Firecat and wished I could empty it into George's body.

"I'll try to get you a cab, Miss....er....Madam". I slipped him a note, of quite a high denomination. He thanked me profusdly. I never thought he'd get a cab at that hour. I had visions of walking through the gray streets to where I could catch an all-night bus. The idea was chilling. But, of course, he did get a cab, and I faced it with dread. Every cabbie knew what he was carrying at that hour. I could hear him saying to his mates: "I carried some lousy pros this morning". Or would he call me whore? Or a call-girl? When he came he watched me, smirking, in his mirror. But I gave him a good tip.

Back home I bathed and emerged smelling sweetly feminine. Then I slid, with a sigh beneath the sheets. I'd let myself in by the side entrance. I'd left Barbara instructions to let me sleep, not to disturb. She had given me a knowing smile that dimpled her cheeks. I guessed that my maid, young as she was, had savoured life, knew men, if not to her cost, obviously to her pleasure. I gathered she was glad that her mistress was getting her share, at least so her twinkling eyes said.

It was about noon when the telephone rang. I peered sleepily at the bedside clock-radio before lifting the receiver.

"Its George" it said, "I want to see you".

"Go to Hell!" I snapped, smacking the instrument back on its cradle. I buried my head in the pink-laced pillow. The damned thing jangled again.

"George, if thats you.....".

"Listen. Don't hang up. I want to give you lunch. It was wonderful last night. A milestone on the road to my grave".

I was quite moved, yet I wanted to laugh. "Where and when?".

"It'll have to be the Ivy I'm afraid. Can you get to West Street by 1.30 p.m?".

"Watch me!". Well, maybe I'd see an actor or two. It was held to be a favourite with that breed.

The meal was uneventful. I was content to let him drink me in and await developments. They came with the coffee.

"You know what I do?".

"You said you were a civil servant".

Grinning: "That covers a multitude of sins".

"So be specific".

"You're good in bed, Joanne". The change of tack made me blink.

"Love is a woman's business".

"So it is. You do it well when you relax and co-operate. Word has it you don't like men, that you're AC/DC. I know you're barren, that makes you rather special. A fun-seeker. Well, I've got a proposition for you". He saw my look. "Now, don't do anything silly. This is a public place and you're a lady".

"Go on".

"We have lots of foreign VIPs coming here - diplomatic missions, trade delegations, you know the kind of thing. They have to be entertained. They always ask for a woman.....".

I felt a flush creeping over my face. "You bastard, what d'you take me for".

"I take you for a rich young woman, well educated, cultured, bored and bedworthy".

I didn't know whether to laugh or screech in fury. In the event I did neither.

"You mean I'm a practised whore?".

Recognising Pepys, he laughed. "Well, not exactly. But I know you do what you do damned well. And the pay is good, and you get presents from the men".

"I don't need money".

"We know that. We know precisely what you're worth, and its close on a cool million".

"So you've done your homework".

"Not me, darling. My underlings. But they don't make mistakes. They tell me you don't work".

"Never have, why should I?".

"Why indeed. You did a bit in the war though".

"Oh, the war. One had to, more or less. I was in your racket, low down



of course. It was only for eighteen months or so. Even a lady, I was told, had to do her duty".

"And now I'm offering you a more palatable duty to someone with your charms". His hand closed over mine. "Have some more wine". So I did.

Fishing for a compliment, I said archly. "You think I can handle it?".

"Why not?". His look was quizzical. "You've got plenty of bloom left. You still have some good years left to you. Its different for men. We can perform all our lives. But women have to cram in experience in a few years, don't they? I mean, my dear, when you have to start wearing scaffolding, a woman is really past it. No man wants to peel off a corselette!".

It was cold-blooded, brutal. It made me realise, if I had ever doubted it, just how much of a man's world it really is. A woman can be bought, used and discarded for a new model when she loses her bloom. Women are not people, we are things. I was bitter and angry, but I did not let it show. "You mean I'm being recruited?". In a way it was a compliment that he wanted me. I felt lovely, cossetted and feminine. I gave him the full treatment, the flashing radiance of a woman's smile. "You want me to be a government whore?".

"That's it. What do you say?".

I must admit to confusion. It was a 'shall I - shan't I' situation. I was uncomfortably aware of my bodily needs, yet I didn't want all men crawling over me. The thought made me shudder mentally. Yet I had been brought up with an exalted idea of service to my country. And it would be fun. I knew my eyes were moist and I saw George through a romantic haze. I was dotty of course! "Well, George, I'll certainly think about it".

He rubbed his chin, then leaned forward in a confidential way. "You see, Joanne, I'd like you to agree. These men don't want streetwalkers. They want English ladies, with conversation higher than the bedroom ceiling. They want to be proud being seen with you, never mind sex".

"You want me to send them back to their wives, their bodies singing with my delights?".

That made him laugh. "You can do it".

"Of course I can".

"So you'll do it?".

"The men of my family have always supported the state with their swords. Know what I mean, George, the blue-blood bit? It ill becomes me to deny the state my body if it can assist it".

"That's my girl! But I have in common decency to warn you. It can be dangerous, you know what I'm talking about".

"Yes, I know what you mean". My lips twitched. "I wouldn't be the first lady to be strangled in bed. Some of the bluest blood has gone that way. And not only strangulation either. Historically, it has been stabbing, decapitation....." and I went on to tell him of the Malatesta lady who had been decapitated by her husband for unfaithfulness.

"Yes" he admitted, "its tough being a female. Still your mothers tell you the facts of life. You can't reverse the inequalities of creation".

That was how much a man cares! But it was arranged. That is how men play upon the dreams of women and lead them on to destruction. But when I went to bed that night and dreamed of adventure, I was Tullia d'Aragona, the high-born courtesan. I can laugh at my folly now, and can see I was playing Russian roulette. How stupid can a young woman get?

FILLE DE JOIE



It would be impolitic (that is, dangerous) to tell you about the work I undertook for George; it would also be tedious in the extreme. I will tell you the truth. Sex as a profession is no great thing for a woman. It is banal, almost mechanical and fundamentally distasteful. At least, so it was for me. And how did I cope with it, feeling as I did? I can best describe it as shutting a door in the brain. What is happening to you is a purely physical thing; one is a commodity for men to use, then discard. You provide a service to a man's member as a manicurist does to his hand. I doubt if there is any whore who does not despise the man she services, as well as herself. I did not even have the justification that I needed the money to maintain myself, as a poor girl does. I did it out of a feeling that I was aiding my country by providing relief for a man's gross desires. Stupid, but true.

There was an element of pride, at least at the level I worked. One man I serviced has since become Head of State in his own country. But I may not speak of it, a lady's life being no more sacrosanct now than in the past. She is not only disposable, she is also expendable.

George explained it very clearly to me. "You may look upon it" says he, "in this way, if you wish. You are a sexual warrior; and like all warriors, you may drop in combat. If you do, Joanne, much as I like you I would have you disposed of very quietly". So I was in no doubt as to the harsh realities. But because of my background, those realities, far from scaring me, were a stimulant, sharpening my pride in being a courtesan. Was I not a modern Tullia d'Aragona? I even found myself wishing I had to wear the identifying scarf as in centuries past. That was the extent of my pride. I was bred up to be so.

Can I draw any conclusions from my admittedly brief career as a government whore? I can say this with great certainty - the French have the best sexual manners. Of other nationalities I say little, except to say that some are pigs, and from my own point of view the followers of the camel driver particularly so.

The first job I did for George was not entirely satisfactory. It was a straight fuck but the man was inexpert. In short, he was lousy in bed. Naturally I did not let my disappointment show in my face. Never tell a man he is inexpert. It strikes at the holy of holies. Ladies have been strangled for less, and the thought of my soft flesh turning to mud did not attract me. So I moaned as if in ecstasy, while I thought of Herman (who is probably the best lover in the world) and this bolstered the man's ego. But I cannot complain, for my fee bought me a lovely pair of high-heeled boots at Chelsea Cobbler, made in double leather, hand-stitched and glorious. They made the eyes of wicked imps turn in the street and the wolf-whistles were balm to my woman's soul, though naturally it is no part of the female's duty to let them know that she is mentally purring!

The weekend after, Herman blew into town, and we spent all Sunday in bed, as he had broken his flight from New York to Zurich especially to see me. It is always a joy to lay with Herman. When Barbara had brought us breakfast, I told her she could have the day off, at which she was mightily pleased. I drove Herman to Heathrow that evening, my body still singing.

From Heathrow I turned the nose of my Mercedes two-seater towards Kent. My parents were pleased to see me, though it was late. Daddy asked me if I had been to Mass. Without a tremor I lied. "Yes, the Brompton Oratory. I still don't like the architecture. Next Sunday I'll go to St.Ethelreda's, Ely Place". But mummy knew better. When we were alone she smiled: "I think you've been worshipping at other altars, my darling. You have been making love. The Mass does not make a lady as radiant as you look. It was good, yes?". I had to admit it was. Then, in a whisper, I asked after her lover. Raising her eyes to Heaven seraphically she indicated her happiness. I was pleased for her, yet sorry for daddy.

It gave me no great pleasure to know that my father was a cuckold but it had been explained to me long since that in arranged marriages, whether for financial or dynastic reasons, lovers are normal, accepted on both sides - unless the husband is very jealous of course.

I drove back to London and almost as soon as I had handed my coat to Barbara, the telephone rang, as a result of which I started on a bizarre adventure which I can relate since it was not part of my duties but as a favour to George. It is rather amusing as shedding light on the deviant world and how people with power will dispose of a lady who falls in (forgive me) the heat of battle.

"No, no" George said, trying not to chuckle, as I could tell, "this is not duty. You can refuse this one, if you've a mind to it. But I hope you'll do it".

"Anything for you, George" I murmured.

"Well, that's fine. I've got this friend called Toby. He lusts after you. He was at that party of Sheri's, remember?". How could I forget? "Should be fun for you, an education" and he laughed in that dirty way men have. "He's a rubber freak!".

I blinked in dismay. "You mean vinyl? Shiny black raincoats and all that? Polyurethane? I've got nothing like that".

"No matter, Sheri has. She'll help you. She's a member of the Mackintosh Society".

"Right. I've got a pair of those high vinyl boots and if Sheri can help with the coat.....".

"That's alright then. She'll help. Now, this is a group fuck up in Bucks. Toby has a watermill up there. Oh, it'll be fun for you, a new experience. And they're all academics or professional people. No proles. You'll have fun prancing around, crackling erotically, won't you?".

"Will I?".

"You know you will". It was true, my heart was beating fast. "I've trafficked with Toby for your usual fee. Don't say I'm not your friend! They'll expect you Saturday afternoon. I envy you your nocturnal adventure!". I could tell he was nearly splitting his sides. "Toby's as queer as a seven pound note!".

"Thank you, George" I countered drily. "I'll get my pen for the address".

I then rang Sheri. I explained the situation and she went into peels of laughter. "Come round, darling. I've got a wardrobe full. Some men are kinky about this stuff".

So I went round immediately. She answered the door herself. "Good to see you again, Joanne. Last time I was.....my God, what a lovely pair of boots! The wages of sin, I suppose?!".

"Not bad, are they?" I said proudly, sticking out my leg and gazing at it complacently. "I bought them with my first fee". She kissed me on the cheek and hugged me.

She fitted me out royally. The raincoat I chose was glossy, with attached hood lined with fur. I cooed as I sank my head into it, and she laughed. "Yes, that'll keep you warm, darling. I've been to these shindigs before. Nothing those weirdies like more than upending a lovely girl in the grass". I laughed delightedly. "I can see this is all new to you, Joanne, but with that on you'll be snug and warm. Blackly Teutonic. Only see you don't end up like the Teutonic Knights at the battle of Tannenberg!".

"You mean.....".

"Yes, that's what I mean, dead. We always take risks, you and I. Men are always strong but this stuff seems to stimulate them that their power is doubled. I've lost girl friends this way. I'd hate to lose you too".



"What happened to the girls?".

"Plug-hole stuff" she shrugged. "The money is good, they didn't bleat at the risks. I've told you before, women are nothing to men, a lower form of life. Its amazing what can be got away with when you know people with power". I knew she was talking about the darkie she'd shot to death in Soho. "And your money and being a member of the landed gentry wouldn't save you.....".

"I know. He's told me. But are they really weird, these people?".

"Not really. The word weird is common parlance for someone who doesn't adhere to the norm. What they do isn't a crime. Its all down to full personality expression. If there is a death, it is accidental, men not knowing their own strength. So its swept under the carpet, a quick disposal job. George always says: 'One hole's as good as another' and I guess he's right. They're all professional people, with pensions to protect. All the talk about female equality is crap. You're an educated lady. You know the man hasn't been born who really thinks of a woman as equal. The law is one thing, human nature something else. When the chips are down, few men will allow a whore to stand in their way. But there's nothing wrong in wearing vinyl, or liking the black shiny look. Its part of life's rich pageant. But I'd take your Astra if I were you. Just as a last ditch argument, you understand".

She was the second person to warn me, and for a few second I was chilled. Then I laughed recklessly. "Hell, I've no mind to become a Police statistic. I can look after myself". How hollow it sounds. Females mouth this piece of folly habitually, knowing in their hearts that when the crunch comes it isn't true. A man in the throes of passion is no laughing matter.

With apparent inconsequence, I remarked: "I read a famous gynaecologist recently where he opined that women lived too long, and that when they've stopped having babies, they have outlived their usefulness. How about that, Sheri". (*)

She nodded her blonde head. "Yes, that's how they think of us. Brood mares - and after they've fulfilled their function, send them to the knacker's yard. If they could, they would. So don't be surprised if a whore succumbs in combat, she's pushed into a hole. We're non-persons anyway. A household pet gets better treatment than a dead whore". Then to lighten the talk. "But see the weather report in the Daily Telegraph today. There's an extensive ridge of low pressure coming in from the Atlantic. Tomorrow night you'll be splashing around very happily". We laughed and with that I left, carrying the sumptuous coat.

Back home I undressed and dived into bed, having hung up the coat. I set the alarm and slept peacefully until the harsh jangle dragged me back to the world, squinting against the morning light. I stretched luxuriously, excitement engulfing me.

When Barbara came in to draw the curtains and to enquire what I would like for breakfast, I told her I wouldn't be home till Sunday evening and if she wanted, she could spend the day with her boy friend. She did like. By such non-costly generosity have the rich always earned the loyalty of servants.

Over breakfast I thought about what Sheri had said. She was right of course, I knew it. I couldn't get out of this affair. And let's be quite honest, I didn't want to. I was curious to know what went on at these affairs. It promised to be fun.

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* I ran this quotation to earth with some difficulty. It was said by the gynaecologist, Edmund Overstreet, in 1963. It is referred to in "The Faces of Europe" edited by Alan Bullock (Phaidon, 1980).

So I packed what I'd need for the weekend, including Sheri's coat and my elegant Swedish boots. I was excited but slightly apprehensive. It was an area I did not know, and Sheri's warnings rang in my head. I looked around at my house and wondered if I'd see it again. I wondered, even, if I'd see my parents again. But I prided myself on being a game woman so I shrugged it off. I took refuge in the illusion that lovely women don't get killed. That would be counter-productive. I was stupid. I had only to glance at newspapers to discover the truth. But my function in life was to give men pleasure, so it was hey for the open road.

The moment the Mercedes hit Wendover I had to resort to the map on the seat beside me. Thank God for the Ordnance Survey! It was tortuous from here on in, so I drove on slowly, watching the signposts carefully. It was right, then left, then right again. Then I saw the tip of a spire and my heart started to beat fast. Then I laughed in sheer delight at what was in store. I wondered what this guy Toby was like. It hardly mattered as long as he was a man and had my fee.

I found the mill easily, standing by and partly over a stream. My tyres crunched on the gravel, as I drove round to the back. I wondered what these deviationists were like; much like myself I imagined. I swung myself out of the car, one foot on the gravel. Looking up I saw a man framed in the doorway, handsome yes, but slightly effeminate perhaps. But my first impression was totally wrong.

"Hi, I'm Joanne" I carolled.

"I'm Toby, your partner" he grinned. "I thought it could only be you".

Instinctively I looked at the other cars. A BMW, a Jensen Interceptor, the almost inevitable E-Type, like Cathie's. I put out my hand to him, trying to keep the bubble out of my voice. "Hi, Toby".

He said, with all the pride of possession: "Lets see what I'm getting for my money". He casually undid my coat, while I stood placidly, knowing he'd be well pleased by what he saw. And when he had run his hand over the merchandise, he muttered: "Christ! Good old George. He said you were the best in the stable, and by God, he's right. What a filly!".

Looking back on this in middle age I find it distasteful, but then, it seems to me, I took it all as my birthright. He took my case and led me in. "Let's go meet the gang. The boys'll drool over you but dont forget you belong to me!".

"Yes, Toby". I was docile, submissive. He kissed me and I could feel he was hard, even then. It was a good augury. The women stared at me coolly, as women will, clinically appraising this new sister who had been forced on them. Toby took my coat. The men were complimentary. The women came up and kissed me in womanly greeting: "I'm Daphne .....I'm Yvonne..... I'm Zoe", this last in a mid-European accent. She sounded like Lilli Palmer.

"How was the weather on the way up?"

I turned to the one called Bill. "Building up from the west I fancy. A large expanse of dark cloud".

"Well, that's good" Toby announced.

Nothing much happened over tea, except mutual probing. They were all friends, I the outsider. Then I noticed everyone seemed to be getting rather tense as the shadows lengthened. Daphne, the University lecturer, whispered in my ear: "We're all longing for the dark".

"That's when it happens?" I asked innocently.

She laughed: "That's when it happens. Your first time?". I agreed it was. "Oh, you'll love it, its very exciting being laid in the dark". I was amused at her enthusiasm, but apprehensive too. What on earth had I got myself into?



The blonde woman, Yvonne, suddenly looked at the window, and clapped her hands delightedly: "Oh, good, its raining! Only drizzle". Her husband, who she called Johnno, grinned: "Be heavier later. That's what the weather forecast said, wasn't it, Toby?".

"That's what it said". Toby took my hand under the table, squeezing it, as if in promise of marvels to come. They were all yawning enough to split something. Toby saw my look and laughed: "Battle nerves!".

Battle nerves indeed. Bosoms were getting agitated, breath a trifle short. It seemed a mixture of dark, sex and vinyl was a heady concoction! Sheri had hinted as much and I was suddenly glad of the presence of my Astra Firecat in my locked case upstairs. Great efforts were made to perpetuate normality without much result. What astonished me was that the women were as eager as the men. There was a gleam in Toby's eye that boded no good for me at all. He cupped my left tit in his hand anticipatorily. I abased my eyes, as a lady should, but smiled. It was at this precise moment that I realised that while Toby gave the impression of being effeminate, that was the last thing he was. I was going to have a rough night. It was thrilling.

Daphne, in her best lectorial style, explained to me why we felt as we did. She needn't have bothered. I knew well enough about phallic symbolls. I knew male minds could be triggered by conceptual foreplay (if I may use her phrase) but to see women so affected astonished me. It was almost as if fever passed from one to another. Even I was getting affected by the lunacy around me.

"Well" Toby muttered thickly, as the tapping at the window increased in tempo, "we'll go and change".

Zoe gurgled: "Let's". And her partner, the one called Bill, got up eagerly, trousers distended.

Daphne's partner, a businessman called Jeremy (he owned the Jensen Interceptor) had not said much during tea, being content to listen, to nod, and to throw in an occasional word. But I could see he adored Daphne. She dark-haired, statuesque, was certainly something to adore for a man. I looked at her flushed, animated face. She put her hand in Jeremy's armpit. "Up, Jenkins! I need you, boy!", and they laughed together. Everybody was laughing; maybe it was the wine and the sherry we had put away.

First I had to get into what Daphne called battledress - that is to say black polo-necked numper, dark skirt, and shiny broad black belt. That lady, who taught history, told me (and it is extravagant nonsense of course) that what I had on was the equivalent of a knight's padded leather suit, and the vinyl was female armour. It has always been my fate to be surrounded by people who deal in historical imagery, for Cathie has this tendency too. On this evening, with the rain pecking insistenly at the window, it got to me, somewhat. I picked up that glossy black raincoat and insinuated myself into it. I esconced my head into the fur and buckled the hood tight around my throat, and my spirit sang. I may laugh about it now, ruefully, but then it was of heart-beating intensity. I sat on the bed, kicked off my courts, and slid my legs into the protective black vinyl. Then rising, I fastened the coat, fastening the belt tight. I smoothed it down, purring at my reflection in the mirror. I pirouetted. I'd drive Toby into a frenzy. I took my gloves and went down.

I had a fondness for dramatic entrances and this was one of my most grand. Sealed up as I was, I looked a treat, and knew it. Yet as I gazed down from the turn in the stairs, I saw that the others looked quite as delicious as I did, their charming faces framed, for all the world like knights in their bascinets. Mentally, I said: "Damn!".

I'd never seen men in vinyl before, believing it to be a female thing, but I had to admit the men looked dashing. Their coats, obviously

bespoke, were in the form of trenchcoats, but otherwise they were in just the same as we ladies, except that they wore rubber riding boots over stretch pants. I was quite impressed.

Bill tore his eyes from Zoe long enough to grin: "You look a treat, love".

Toby poured me a sherry and we stood there making small talk, while we thought about other things entirely. Then he said: "Joanne, we've got business to transact. Come into my study". I followed him.

He told me I look fabulous. I nodded: "It comes with the hormones. No credit to me. But you're right. I feel fabulous. I am fabulous".

"Oh, I believe it" he chuckled. "George says you are, and he's no mean judge".

"I'll try to justify his good opinion. It was smug, arrogant even. I liked what I did, and I did it well. I felt no shame - not then - but deep down I had this feeling of self-contempt but I always trod on this hard. I watched him unlock a desk drawer. I smiled.

So he gave me the £100 that was due to me. He wanted to know if that was alright. I told him it was fine. I did what I always did. I pushed the notes down inside my boot. "Sealed up like this" I joked, "its the only place". He laughed.

When we returned, the men took themselves off to the loo. I thought we'd go out immediately, but no. I watched the four of them go off laughing. Seeing my astonishment, Yvonne gave a little laugh. "Its always like this. They know we want them, so they make us wait". We all felt deprived. It was like waiting to go over the top.

So we stood there, four gleaming, tightly enclosed, excited women. We were impatient, sinews cracking with desire, stimulated by the darkness, the clatter of the rain against the window, against which we were proof. The others were old hands, but I gathered that the heart-racing excitement never fails.

In her charmingly accented English, Zoe murmured: "Is it not scandalous that they, our men, should keep us waiting like this. Damn it, my nipples are like iron".

Yvonne turned with a crackle of vinyl. "There is nothing specifically Slavonic in sexual desire". The Czech laughed, saying she supposed not.

Daphne, whose apparent control belied a raging furnace within, flexed her fingers, gazing lovingly at her gloved hands. "If I know men - and I do - they're standing in the john telling each other how they're going to fuck us".

"Well, I wish they'd come and do it" Zoe grumbled. "Don't they know our legs are like water".

"Of course they know" I ventured. "Men are bastards like that. Since when do ladies get treated with respect".

"Of course, its different when you are married. Then you have them in economic thrall. You can make them dance to your tune".

"If you're lucky" Daphne agreed, "but Joanne is right". Then to me she asked how I felt. I said my knees were knocking uncontrollably. She gave a little laugh. "Ah, that's nerves. But don't worry, pet, Toby is worth waiting for. So's Jeremy. He's a quiet one; but when it comes to battle, he's a tiger".

The conversation died. Somebody suggested a group hug. So, in the perfume laden atmosphere, we kissed, wishing each other luck. "And, my God" Yvonne giggled, "we're going to need it. It'll be rough out there".

"Oh, I do so hope so" I sighed. "I can handle it".



"You're mighty chipper, Joanne, considering you're going to end up on your back" Yvonne chuckled.

"Lets hope we all do" Daphne retorted unsmiling. "Hardly worth donning harness if we don't". The allusion was not lost upon us. "And don't forget that isn't just imagery, ladies. This could be our Lake Peipus, our Tannenberg. Forgive me raising the point".

"Oh, I don't think I'd mind" Zoe mused. "Taking the thought further, Daphne.....".

"No, please don't. I'm sure we all know the dangers" Yvonne stated firmly. "Male/female relationships are always violent. We're always at a disadvantage at the best of times. Out there in the dark we're almost helpless. But as we're game women, we don't talk about that".

But of course they did, taking out the skeleton and rattling it in my face. They were on fire of course, and the talk was giddy but I wished myself back in my own bed in London, and not going out to face God knows what. But I was spared any more of their verbal excesses by the boisterous laughter of the men returning. I was near the door and I plainly heard one of them say: "They should be ripe for the plucking now!". The others did not, I think, hear that.

"They're coming" Yvonne gasped. "Battle stations, ladies. Combat looms!".

"That it does" Daphne trilled, staring down at her gleaming legs complacently. "But what the Hell! It'll be fun".

Zoe placed her hand on her heart, and in a barely audible whisper said to me: "If this was my last night on earth, this is how I'd like it to be".

Then they were there, the men. Lust confronting beauty. But we were lustful too. One cannot load it all on men. We were not nuns, but ladies of the world; we were also fools, but nobody immersed in sexual longing recognises folly. I thought of my mother's teaching, when I was a teenager. "Dearest, your orifice is there to be used. To men it is a prize to be taken. Use it. Never let your lust grow rusty. Love is what we are born for". Before marriage she had been as wild as anyone, and even now was hardly abstemious, and I loved her for it.

Suddenly I vanished in Toby's arms, it was comforting there. I heard feminine cooing all around me, but I couldn't bother with them. It was every lady for herself. When he released me, my eyes shone (so he said) like stars. I believe him; on principle I always believe a man's honeyed words, a willing victim on the altar of Priapus.

I said softly: "Toby, lead me where you will". I didn't care a damn what happened. I was snug and warm, surrounded as my head was by fur, a suitable protection for a lady to go down before a man's lust. So I clung to him, trustingly, abandoning myself to mercies that would be anything but tender. It was stupid but I had been brought up to be a gallant woman, to accept the pleasures of life, and to give back the same pleasure to men.

It was pitch black away from the mill. I said plaintively that I couldn't see a thing. He answered, as I knew he would, that what did it matter, he was there. The rain was quite steady now, bouncing off my coat and boots; it pecked impotently, angrily at us. I finally got the point of the complete protection syndrome, and he sensing I had been ensnared, chuckled: "Great, isn't it?". I had to agree.

The others had departed from us, walking I knew not where, and cared less. I knew we were walking away from the path, for I felt my three inch heels sink into sodden turf. It would be soon, I knew, and my heart thumped. A call girl takes risks in her stride; she has to. Yet he was a strong man and I at his mercy. He'd paid for service and he'd take. I knew he was strong now. How could I ever have thought him a poove?

So why didn't he attack me? What was the matter with the damned fellow? I was at his mercy in the dark, and I was a professional, and game. I did like a man to be a man, like any female.

Then I understood only too well. I screamed as I sank up to my calves in a morass of mud and water. I was stuck fast. He laughed cruelly as he heard me struggle, enjoying my distress. "Don't bother. Save your strength. You're done for, honey".

"You bastard!" I wailed, "you unspeakable.....dirty.....".

It was then I heard a woman's stricken cry that fell to a groan, some long way off. It was wenching time and somehow all the strength went out of me. I was done for, as he said, and I knew it. I was stuck fast and terrified. He could have taken my life, easily. I could not have stopped him. In two minutes I would have been dead, two big hands around my windpipe. But that was the last thing he wanted.

He stepped down into the filth with me and attacked me brutally. He said I struggled feebly but bravely. His tongue forced open my mouth; gasping, I jerked and moaned. I had no legs. I hung, whimpering, in his arms. There was no respite. His hands were everywhere. Then he thrust his hand up under my skirt, with unerring accuracy; it was like an electric shock. I screamed, coherent thought fleeing from me. I felt myself pulled up sharply. I heard the gurgling, protesting squelch as my boots came free. He threw me on the ground like a sack of grain but I scarcely felt myself hit the soft ground. He was on me in an instant and from then on it was brutal, violent action. There in the dark, in the rain, I was martyred.

I do not intend to give a blow-by-blow account of my crucifixion. It has been played out in countless billions of situations since the world began. For a woman it is a commonplace horror, for which she is prepared at her mother's knee. However it is dressed up, it is always nasty, vicious and violent, such is a lady's fate. You cannot reverse the inequalities of creation. So I do not describe my suffering. Nor, in fact, is it important. What is important is what came after.

So, when he had finally finished with me, when I clawed back to life after a faint, and found myself alone in the rain, I could sob my heart out. I lay there for some time, listening to the rain crackling against my body, and cursing all men to perdition. Then I recovered my self-possession and with it my self-contempt. It came to me, then, how far I had sunk in my esteem of myself. It is one thing for a lady to take a lover, to give and receive pleasure; but to rut on the ground like an animal is disgusting. There, in the dark, I determined to cut loose from my life, in which I had many men crawling over me. I would no longer be a whore, a call girl, a courtesan. I would embrace decency. I tried to get up but fell. My legs would not bear me. I waited a while, drooping and hurting, then I tried again. This time, with the aid of a tree, I made it. I saw a lighted window, and stumbled towards it, splashing through the sodden turf towards the mill. I came to the bridge and dragged myself over it by the handrail.

It would not be true to say I walked through the door. I collapsed through it. Toby dragged me up, laughing: "Like it, did you?". There was no pity in his eyes, just cruel triumph. "You earned your money, I'll say that. You were very brave. And say, how did you like my little surprise?".

I told him exactly what he was, what they all were, all the men in the world since Noah. And I traced Toby's ancestry for him in six pithy sentences, saving him genealogists' fees. All the while he laughed, thinking it hugely funny.

Daphne handed me a sherry. "Its a man's world, Joanne. Or hadn't you heard?". Then she giggled. "Look at the state of your boots!". I sank into a chair and sipped the comforting drink. Oh yes, I told her, I knew it was a man's world. I asked her how she got on. She said, eyes dreamy, it was wonderful, just bloody wonderful. I smiled faintly.



I looked at Jeremy's grinning face with distaste, at Bill, then at John. "Where's your wife?".

"Yvonne?". Was there another, I wondered. "Out there of course". He waved his hand airily. "She likes making it back under her own steam".

"That's standard practice, is it?". My sarcasm could have been sold in slices.

"Sure. Birds make their own way back". Bill shrugged. "We've always done it that way. Why not? You claim equality these days, don't you?".

In another place, at another time, I would have tangled with him, hotly; possibly I would have done then had there not been a noise. Somebody was fiddling with the door handle. Then there was a thud. "She's fallen" Daphne, with seeming unconcern.

The men opened the door to reveal Yvonne, muddy, wild-eyed. They lifted her up. "God" she mumbled, "that was a rough fuck!". I raised my eyes to Heaven in despair. "Seen Zoe?".

Daphne shook her head, sipping brandy with the truculent air of a warrior who had fought hard, and survived. "She'll make it".

Bill looked at me: "It takes time sometimes. Zoe's a brave kid. She was good too. But then she always is".

It was about ten minutes later that they started worrying. Toby said: "Guess we'd better go look. Hell, its nearly one o'clock. She should have been back by now. I'll get a torch".

So we went out into the rainswept darkness. We soon found her, the light picking out her gleaming body. We hurried over. Toby's sharp intake of breath told us there was something wrong. "My God, she's dead!".

Bill panicked, as well he might. "She can't be, Toby. But she did go a mite quiet. I thought she'd fainted. You know what women are".

"Well, she's as dead as mutton now" Toby snapped. Daphne's truculence suddenly deserted her and she became a woman. Her scream was lost in the wind and the rustle of leaves. "Shut up, you damned fool. Or you won't live to be Professor".

"What are we going to do?". You could hear the terror in Bill's voice. I thought how cowardly men are, with their brag and bluster. Toby shook him roughly.

"The last thing we must do is go to pieces. We'll carry her in. Then I'll make a phone call. And you two guys can get spades and lanterns from the shed. I know George'll say we're to dispose of her. So we'll dig a hole and push her in".

That is precisely what George did say. He'd cope with the rest. "Well, its true she has no family" Daphne muttered. "Sorry, had. I don't suppose she'll be missed too much".

I didn't believe what I was hearing and said so. I said it was scandalous a lady should be pushed into a hole like a beast, without burial service. Toby snarled: "If there's one thing I hate, its a whore with religion. Its enough to make one puke". My cheeks burned, but I kept quiet. I watched her carried in and laid down on the grass. Nobody had thought to close her eyes. I bent down to do this at least. I said a few Catholic prayers; she was a Czech and probably of my Faith. The men dug a hole between two rhododendron bushes, laid Zoe in it, trampled the earth down and replaced the sodden turf. We ladies stood by holding the lights, making ourselves accessories to the illegal disposing of a dead body. I guess we all knew that. "She'll rest easy there" Toby mused sometime near dawn, "probably help the bushes grow. I'll train 'em so they cover her". I felt sick to my stomach. "Soon as its light, you'd better go, Joanne. You've got your money. And keep your mouth shut, or you'll wish you had". This was the real Toby.

I rose, said goodbye to the subdued gathering. Then, like a fool, I had to ask Bill the question that had been roaming around my head ever since had disposed of Zoe.

"Did you hit her, Bill?".

"Just a tap to keep her quiet. She was insatiable. That couldn't have killed her".

"I'd keep quiet if I were you, Bill" Toby said tartly. "You've said quite enough as it is. Joanne isn't one of us, she's a call girl".

I flushed to the roots of my hair, but it was not until I was on the way back to London that I realised the danger I was in. I had more than an idea of George's ruthlessness and I could see that I had indeed been a spectator at something it would have been better if I had not seen. Alright, thousands of women disappear every year and most are never seen again. We are eminently disposable and terror swept over me. I glanced in the driving mirror. The road was empty, to my intense relief. But I was still frightened. I had been around George and Sheri for only a short time but I had soon come to realise that I was part of a world that was shadowy and human life cheap. Sheri had killed a man and did not batt an eyelid; nor was she apprehended for it. I'd heard, too, of other call girls who had been found dead and no apparent action was ever taken by the Police. Would I be next? After all, it was patently clear to me that Sheri was George's recruiting officer and there were pretty young women in plenty pathetically eager to earn good money by opening their legs. That was what Sheri's parties were - a display cabinet. George would come and choose, as he had chosen me. Oh God, I asked myself, why did I get into this?

I drove to Sheri's first. It was a more restrained Sheri. I started to tell her about my awful experience. She cut me short. "I know, I've heard. Must have been awful for you". There was no pity, no sorrow for Zoe, nothing. Sheri exhibited the hard-bitten side of herself I had not seen before. "I'll tell you something, Joanne. You are in danger. You know too much, much too much. I'll try to head it off, for friendship's sake, but you dont know George. All I can do is to give you a better gun, an under-skirt rig, and a box of ammo. I'll give you a Centennial; its a manstopper, unlike the Astra. But don't tell George. Its down to you now. And until its over I don't want to see you, and I don't know you. Get it?".

"Sheri, for goodness sake" I pleaded. "It can't be that bad. We were all accessories. None of us will talk. None of us can".

"And that's your only argument for survival, my dear. Otherwise you are exposed, out in the open with a spotlight on you. You hold the careers of five people in your hands. It would be better for them if you were dead". And when I looked white and bewildered, she took pity on me. "Look, you damned fool, they can be bribed into silence. You can't. You are much too rich. You want nothing".

"What do they want?".

Sheri sighed. "Bill wants a diplomatic post abroad; George can see he gets it. Toby wants early retirement and an enhanced pension; George can get it for him. John and Jeremy want government contracts; George can arrange that. Yvonne wants to be addressed as Lady; John will be getting a knighthood one day for services to industry. And Daphne wants a Professorship. All this George can attend to. But you?". She laughed with humour that was a little bitter. "Hell, you could buy and sell all of us".

I went home to Mayfair assured I was going to die. I oiled the Centennial and did the same with a shotgun I used when invited to shoot on a friend's estate. I heard nothing from George. One week went by. Two weeks. Three. I rang Sheri. She put the phone down on me, hard.



Commonsense told me to get out of London. I called Barbara and told her we were going to the country for a few days. Barbara was my insurance policy. I guessed I was under surveillance. I was. I looked out of the window. The same car as always was there. I smiled to myself. It was like a bad B-movie! Barbara asked me which car I would be taking. I said neither the Bentley or the Mercedes. We'd be going by train. I wanted crowds around me. She raised her eyebrow. I asked her to get a taxi, to ring the rank. I dressed in non-startling fashion; I wanted to merge. There was no man to stimulate. I had dressed with care, with my under-skirt holster nestling comfortingly against my leg. I had packed very little, Barbara had packed more. I had clothes at home that would fulfil all my needs. It suddenly occurred to me to ask Barbara if she rode. She said she did, that she had learned at the Cotswold School of Equitation. I was impressed. Well, I told her, we'll go riding every morning. I went down to the kitchen and told the housekeeper I'd be away for a week, that she could take it easy, and just keep the mail till I got back. Barbara called me: "Its here, madam".

All the crime stories I'd read came into my head as I got into the cab. The door handles were standard. We could get out in a hurry if we had to. I had told him Charing Cross. With what I thought was great cunning I had chosen a busy time, and reckoned I'd be safe enough. I got myself against a wall and told Barbara to go and get two singles for Headcorn. The car had followed us all the way but I thought we had lost it in the traffic maelstrom of Trafalgar Square but couldn't be sure.

As I stood there waiting for my maid I looked over to the W. H. Smith stall (*) and my eye was taken by a placard under the banner of the Financial Times. It read:-

'MADAME DIVERSIFICATION' ALL SET TO SELL INDUSTRIAL OCTOPUS - Paris Report.

I was on the train before I realised what my eyes had read. We had time. I sent Barbara back to buy a copy of the FT. Francoise was always vaunting the benefits of diversification. "Never put all your eggs in one basket" was her cry. My eyes bulged as I read the report. It seemed that a German conglomerate had made an offer for her empire, and she was going to accept it. There was controversy and Francoise was right in the middle of it. She'd sell alright; Francoise was a devotee of the main chance. The French government were not happy. De Gaulle might have been chummy with Adenauer, but the French had long memories. I was tickled by the fact that they called her 'Madame Economic Miracle'. I thought how she'd love that. I didn't know then that Francoise was in the middle of a nervous breakdown. But that comes later.

One day I had a call from Sheri. She was unfriendly and I was under no illusions that she, too, wanted me dead. Why should she not? I had seen her gun down a man. While I was 'in the business' I could be trusted, but now I had served notice that I wanted to secede, I was dangerous. "How long are you going to skulk in the country?" she wanted to know. "You are bringing danger to your parents. We could get you any morning when you go riding, but you always take your maid with you. I never thought you were gutless, Joanne. Why don't you come back and face the music? You're always prating about your noble birth. You're no good advertisement!". I went scarlet, giving her back the lie.

That afternoon Mother, Barbara and I drove into Maidstone. I went into a bookshop and bought Bruce Tegner's "Complete Book of Self Defence"

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* Then in the middle of the concourse, where it remained until the alterations in 1988, since when it has been pushed to the right hand side, near platforms 5 and 6.

and set myself the task of brushing up on the techniques Cathie had taught me years before. Judo was useless; judo is a sport, never mind what that "funny lady on television" (Barbara's words, not mine) said. My techniques were devastating and violent. I dredged it all up out of my memory, honing my knowledge to a sharp edge. Mummy saw Barbara and I working at it in a summerhouse and wondered what the Hell was going on. I worked hard, and sweat glistened on my forehead. "One never knows when it'll come in useful" I opined, and she nodded.

Mrs.Arkwright rang every day, telling me of any callers, phone calls and what not. The housekeeper was deaf, so it was simply a question of listening to the litany and ringing off. Then one day she said a Miss Dabrowska had called at the house, presented her compliments, said she was sorry not to have seen me, looked forward to meeting me when I got back to town. I knew no Dabrowska. She sounded foreign I said. Mrs. Arkwright sniffed: "You could cut her accent with a knife, madam. I'd say German. Or Polish". As I put the phone down, I knew. My heart was going like a trip-hammer.

So we went back to London. We had scarcely got inside the house when a local florist delivered a box. I opened it carefully. Inside was a single orchid; They knew I was back alright. The car was parked just down the street, the same car that had been there before I'd fled to Kent. For two days I didn't go out. I slept in the attic, a double-barrelled shotgun at my side and the Centennial under my pillow. On the Tuesday I said to Barbara: "Tomorrow's your half day. Take the whole day. Go see your boyfriend". Mrs.Arkwright had the Wednesday off too. I'd be alone in the house. George knew that very well.

On the Wednesday morning, after they'd gone, I trimmed down. I put on a tight jumper, equally tight white stretch pants with cowboy boots over and a shiny black belt. At least I could fight and have a chance. I kept my guns handy. The Centennial in a bowl of flowers, the shotgun in a long case clock. Then I waited for what my instinct told me was coming. Then, about eleven, a taxi drew up outside. I looked down into the street from the window. I giggled nervously. Someone had been watching "The Avengers" I thought. A blonde in a cloak. The bell rung. I signed myself and walked slowly, deliberately down the elliptical staircase. I opened the front door. "Yes?" I asked austerely.

"I'm Valentina Dabrowska" she said sweetly. It was true, she had a thick foreign accent. "We have a mutual friend, I think".

"George?"

"That's right. May I come in?".

"But of course".

I will describe Dabrowska for you. First let me say that had Brian Clemens put this in a script for the Avengers series, he could scarcely have found a more sinister woman as the "baddie". She had a cloak, as said, and she was blonde. She was tightly kitted out, too, except that her pants were black and her boots were obviously bespoke, to the knee, and flat-heeled. She was, I suppose, half a head taller than I. Her face was very strong, not unhandsome if you like the male look in a woman, but not noticeably feminine. Harry's sister, Mary, had been a similar type. She was strong, too, was Dabrowska but suddenly I was not afraid. There comes a time when fear flees before the inevitable.

As we mounted the stairs, she gave a lop-sided smile. I raked her coolly.
"I suppose you know why I'm here, Mrs.Cartwright?".

"Well, now" I sneered, sarcastically, "lets see. I know who you are. I can guess what you are".

She laughed. "George said you'd be spunky. I'm glad. It makes my job so much easier. I was afraid you'd scream".



"I'll not scream".

"I'm sure of that" she nodded. "George said you'd be brave. Its sad you know so much. You're a pretty thing. You see, I've come to kill you".

"I guessed that. I never believed people like you existed in real life. You're a contract killer, right?".

"I owed George a favour. This is on the house".

I remember laughing brittly. "I'm glad you are a professional anyway. May we maintain the amenities? Would you like a sherry before you do the job?".

She nodded approvingly. "Why not?".

Now, it took great guts to turn my back on her, but I kept an eye on her in the mirror above the drinks cabinet. I saw her left hand slide towards her handbag, that lay beside her on the settee. It was now or never. I grabbed the decanter, swivelled and hurled it at her, flinging myself at her. Dabrowska was stunned by the heavy glass that took her just above the eyes. I had the advantage, briefly and I didn't waste it. This was a fight to the death and I had to win it.

I have to admit that I didn't fight clean. I was not a professional and I had to fight dirty. I jabbed my fingers in her eyes. She screeched in agony but her strong hands were around my windpipe, throttling me. I was on her chest, my fists smashing down, using my rings to tear her face open. I punched her in the mouth, in the face. The pressure on my throat was increased. "Die, bitch, die" I croaked. She laughed weakly, but as I continued to punch her, she started to whimper. I knew I had her. I gave her one last right cross to the jaw, and her hands left my throat at last. Then frenzy took hold of me. I took the bitch by the shoulders and smashed her head against the floor repeatedly until I saw blood appear on the carpet. Then I let her fall, like a floppy doll.

I stared into her eyes; they were lifeless jelly. Valentina Dabrowska had reached the end of her rope. Her face was covered with blood, and my knuckles were raw, and they hurt. I opened her handbag and took out the gun. A .357 Smith & Wesson Magnum. I felt sick. If she'd reached it, parts of me would be splattered over the wall. Therefore I felt no pity for the woman, not even when I was made aware that her stomach had yielded up its contents at death. It was distasteful, yet she had asked for it.

I crawled away to where the decanter lay. There was still some sherry left. I got my back against the wall, and put it to my lips. It helped. I stared at her, the professional killer. Her mouth was open. The drink took control of me, stamping heavily on my nerves. I was in control again. Should I take her boots, I asked myself. They were fine, top grade leather, and would fit me. Why not? My ancestors would smile at me approvingly. I didn't have the strength yet, but that would come. I crawled on hands and knees to the drinks cabinet, helped myself to brandy. After that I found the strength to pull off the boots. I looked at the label. German manufacture, hand-stitching, double leather. Miss Dabrowska had good taste - had had, I corrected myself mentally. "Thanks, honey" I murmured, and it was then I realised it hurt me to talk, not much, but some. It was about that time I rang George.

"Oh, Georgie" I cooed. He was startled, gasping. "Is that you, George?".

"Its me" he gurgled.

"Could you send two of your superannuated errand boys to pick up whats left of the woman Dabrowska. And no funny business. I'll have a double-barrelled shotgun trained on 'em".

"Have you croaked her?".

"Don't be daft, George. Of course I croaked her. You sent her to kill me".

"I wish to God she had".

"I'm sure. Yet she didn't seem so good to me".

"Then you're a fool. She was one of the best freelance assassins in Europe".

"That so? You could have fooled me, George. And I want to see you tomorrow. Your treat. I suggest Rules, Maiden Lane".

"I'll meet you, but it wont make any difference. You know too much, too many people want you dead".

"We'll see. I've got something on you, you've got something on me. Its a stand-off. Make it 12.30 sharp, George. We've got a lot to talk about".

I went downstairs and unlocked the front door. I then retreated up the staircase, with shotgun and two handguns. I heard the ambulance come, saw the men open the door. I invited them up. When they hove into my line of vision I saw they were carrying a rubber body-bag. They looked at me in some awe and asked where the body was. I indicated with the shotgum. From my vantage point I could watch them at their task. They were not really ambulance men I knew, but they were expert and quick. I watched them zip up the bag and carry it out. She was still floppy I noticed, no rigor mortis yet. Without a word they went, eyes agog. I went down, locked the door. Then I had to clean up and that was very distasteful to me. I did work I had never done, with rubber gloves, scrubbing brush, disinfectant, the whole bit. It took me an hour or more before I was done. Then, and then only, I bound up my raw, bleeding knuckles.

I must be a thoroughly bad woman, for I suffered no remorse. When Mrs. Arkwright and Barbara returned, I was watching television. Barbara, who knew something but not all of my secrets, but had guessed, however imperfectly, why I had given her the whole day off, said nothing. Nor did she do more than glance at my bandaged hands. I slept with Dabrowska's gun under my pillow.

I woke with the dawn and lay wondering what I should wear to my meeting with my persecutor. I decided on my white leather suit. It was shattering to a man. Laying there I became emotional about it. If I was to get gunned down in the street, I wanted to go in my finery, as a lady. I guessed that George would have something murderous planned for me. The suit had both pants and a skirt, but I wore the skirt because I wanted to carry the Centennial. With the white boots and cloak I looked fabulous. I told Barbara to get it out, and she drooled over it. I smiled.

Over breakfast I made a few telephone calls. The beauty of coming from my background is that you have contacts in the right places. So I rang a guy I knew was well-placed to aid a damsel in distress. When I told him what I wanted, he was appalled. "He did what?! This is the unacceptable face of government. Sure I know the man and his damned section, I shouldn't but I do. Its hush-hush. He's nothing but a glorified pimp. I can't have you liquidated. Dog doesn't eat dog, Joanne. And you're one of us. Leave it to me". So I left it to him. I smiled when I pictured George's fraught morning.

I smiled, maliciously joyful. I got Barbara to drive slowly down Maiden Lane twice before parking outside the Restaurant. Then George's car drove up. He got out, locking it. He looked madder than a wet hen. I took my time over my entrance. It was really something.

It was a bizarre conversation we had, George and I. He rose smiling as I crossed to the table, but the smile did not reach his eyes. After the waiter had left he lost no time. Still smiling, he leaned forward and grated: "You devious bitch! You've unleashed the country house Mafia on me".

"Have I, Georgie?" I enquired archly.



"You know you bloody have" he growled.

I nodded. "Yes, George, I have power, I have influence. I could destroy you if I wanted, George". I smiled at a passing waiter, in response to his hardly repressed admiration. "People like you don't mess with people like me. Not if you want your pension anyway. And you talk too much in bed, Georgie. Lust seems to unlock your tongue, laddie. I know you expect a knighthood when you retire". His neck seemed to swell with rage, though his tight smile did not leave his face. "But not to worry, George. We'll do a trade. My life for silence. You agree, I'm sure".

"I've no option, you dirty bitch. The Old Man called me in this morning, read me the riot act. I'm to take no further action against you. So I won't. But God help you if you talk".

"I shall not talk, George. You see, you made the error of thinking that the teeth of the aristocracy are drawn, but you've discovered it isn't so. When the chips are down, we look after our own. Just as you do to Sheri".

"She's vital to my operation".

"I know that. Your recruiting officer. She's also a murderess. But then so am I, eh? By the way, what about Dabrowska?".

"Forget it, it was justifiable homicide. You were fighting for life. But it beats me how you did it. She was one of the best freelance assasins in Europe. Too old I guess, couldn't cut the mustard any more".

I chuckled. "No, she fought well, like a professional. But I stunned her with the decanter. I had the advantages. At the end I had her whimpering".

"Yes, I saw what you did to her. I guess she would whimper. I saw you took her boots".

"To the victor the spoils" I said drily. "But you avoid me, George. What have you done with the body?".

"You think maybe we can't dispose of a body bag? Hell, Joanne, by this time she's at the bottom of the North Sea. I'd hoped it would be you there".

"I'm sure you'd be happier with me dead, George" I nodded. "And to tell the truth, she nearly got me. Once. But it is amazing how combat concentrates the mind. And her a contract killer! I could have done it quicker. But I wanted the cow to suffer, know she was going to die".

"You're a hard bitch". He skewered a potato with his fork. "You carrying?".

"A gun? Sure. You don't think I'd come to a meeting with you without one do you? I'm not stupid. If I'm hard, George, I'm what you, life and Sheri Masters have made me. This is a dog eat dog business. And I want out".

"You're out. I've told you".

"And you'll have that damned car removed from outside my house?".

"Sure, when I get back to the office".

"And what about the little reception committee outside? Doubtless you arranged a nasty accident for me".

He grinned in reluctant admiration. "Yes, you're to be gunned down when you leave. Didn't have time to withdraw the order before I left the office". I tensed. "Don't worry. Leave with me and you'll be alright".

"I better had be, George. If I lay dying on the pavement, I'll still find strength to drill you, you bastard, before I go".

"I know you will. You're quite a girl. But don't worry. I've promised you your life. I'll see to it".

And that was how it turned out. I trusted George not at all. I drew my nickel-plated Centennial and crowded it into his spine. It was only much later that I could laugh, equating it with a bad film script; but then I was a lady fighting for life and determined to sell my life expensively and drop the bastard in his tracks, if I had to. "For God's sake put it away" he snarled over his shoulder. "I'll see to it".

Grimly I remember saying: "You'd better, George".

There was a car parked on the opposite side of Maiden Lane, slightly to the left, and forward of my Bentley. The window at the rear was down and resting on it was something blue. My heart thumped, knowing I was within seconds of death. George walked toward the car with infuriating slowness. There was talk. The motor sprang into life. The window was raised and it slid past where I was, half sheltered behind a stationary Bedford van. I didn't holster my gun, even after I had watched it turn the corner into Southampton Street.

George came back, scowling: "Satisfied, bitch? And put that thing away. This is London, not a Hollywood film set!".

"What was it?". I licked parched lips. "Armalite?".

"You don't want to know".

No more I did. I beckoned to Barbara and the car slid forward. I still hesitated to holster my gun. "You're getting neurotic" he sneered, "I've told you you're safe".

"You think maybe I trust you, George?".

He gave me an unpleasant, vengeful look, as he inserted his key in the car door. "I'll know better than recruit a blue-blood again". He drove off as Barbara held open the door of the Bentley. I had hastily holstered my gun, and she knew nothing of it. At least, I do not think so. If she did, it was never mentioned. I sank back into my seat, shattered, trembling. Death had come close, and not strangulation - a lady's usual exit if violence strikes - but hot lead. My knees literally knocked together. I said to Barbara: "Lets go for a ride, somewhere in the country, and stop at a pub. I need a brandy. Can you make the Bridge Hotel at Shillingford before it closes?".

"I can try". She looked at me in the mirror and I smiled back wanly. Despite her uniform and peaked cap of a chauffeuse, she was undeniably attractive. I would willingly have drawn her into bed, even though she was an employee, my maid; but she was lower middle class with the rigid moral standards typical of the breed. I knew I did not dare approach her in that way.

She did make it to Shillingford before Closing Time and I had my brandy and she, to my horror, had a beer. We had time for a refill too. We sat there drinking. It really was not too warm and I was glad of my white leather; Barbara seemed not to care. We talked, and as we talked I kept a wary eye on the river. But I was interested in Barbara's talk too. I wallowed in the smug superiority that class and education gives. All my life I have fought against this deplorable trait. At the convent I had been called "stuck up" and there had been one or two cat fights. Yes, I am arrogant, I confess it. We talked of love but there was no point of contact. For Barbara love meant marriage, a husband, babies. Having been brought up by my mother to be gallant, love for me meant instant desire and swift fulfilment. I had a permanent lover, yes, but I was always open to offers if the man was of my class. I knew Barbara was a better woman than I was and resented it; it made me want her in my bed even more. Yet I flicked my lust aside for I knew she would be horrified if I suggested it. She was that kind.

When we got back to town, the surveillance car had gone and I never saw it again. Yet I walked circumspectly for a long time, and rarely left the house without a gun, either in my under-skirt holster or in a Berns Martin inside pants holster. I felt safer that way.



Two days later Herman rang, saying he'd be in town in three days time. I had intended to go to Kent for a spell but had to put it off. I rang mummy and told her my plans. She said that was fine, she'd have my room got ready. She also said there was a meeting of the Hunt the following week. I gurgled with delight. I hadn't put leg over a horse for a long time, and looked forward to it. Mummy sounded rather breathless as she told me and I knew why. Tom would be there, her Tom, the gentleman farmer from Romney Marsh. It was fun being a lady. Her words, not mine. Though I agree of course.

Herman came, and I met him at Heathrow, so eager was I to have him in me. I hadn't had sex for quite a while and to a lady like me, that is disaster. I needed his arms, a man's arms, a man I could trust not to put a slug in me. He brought me a present of course and I sighed over it. Then it was to bed and what the novels call silken dalliance. It was good. Herman was a fine lover, and drove me always to the edge of madness. Then, passion spent, we lay quietly, entwined. That was good too, as a lull till battle was joined again. As Mary Astor confided to her diary about her own lover, Herman seemed always to be hard. I could not but marvel at it.

He expressed surprise at my security devices and the console that controlled them. "Its a wicked world and I'm a lady on her own" I whispered, "and there are other females in the house. It is my duty to protect them". I think it convinced him. I almost convinced myself. Then, at my pleading, he mounted me again.

After a day of recuperation, I departed for Kent, leaving Mrs.Arkwright in sole command of the house. I was to be away from my Mayfair haunts for a long time. I read Vogue on the way down to Kent. Barbara had to concentrate on her driving. South-east London is no joke, traffic-wise. My joy when the Bentley turned into the drive, leading to our 14th century manor-house, was almost too much to bear. And my parents' joy at seeing their youngest, if erring, daughter was unconfined.

On the day of the Hunt, as we were dressing, I noticed that mummy was flushed, and she giggled a lot, like a girl on her first adventure. I smiled tolerantly. I sat on the bed watching her. Nothing becomes a lady more than hunting clothes; that is my unshakeable belief. We both looked fine, but mummy especially so. She had height, exuding everything that attracts a man; and she was well endowed, an attribute for which every lady should thank her Maker. Her boots shone like glass, and she was point-de-vice in every department. I told her she was a beautiful woman. She nodded, then absently: "Yes, I've been very lucky".

"And you look excited".

She turned to me, where she was sitting at her dressing table. "Wouldn't you?". Then she laughed, breathlessly. "Tom says he's going to rape me today".

I raised an eyebrow, finely winged: "You going to let him?".

"My dear Joanne, I shan't be able to stop him. The swine is built like Henry VIII. He rides a Lipizanner, fifteen hands. You can't miss Tom". She was silent for a minute. "Anyway, I want him to. I don't get much from your father nowadays. What there is, that Polish woman gets".

"Well, she's beautiful, mummy".

"Yes, and younger, damn her".

"You know" I mused, "I wish Sally was like us". She looked at me, amused. "I mean, she misses so much".

"What makes you think she isn't like us? Granted she was a sexual late starter, but.....".

"You mean!?".

"Of course. She's my daughter, your sister is she not? She put her conscience on the shelf, and jumped in the water feet first!".

"Bravo, Sally! I'd like to hear her Confession!".

"I imagine that, like Catholic ladies everywhere, she accepts the penances the priest places on us. Our own PP doesn't approve of me, nor of you, Joanne. About you he becomes quite vituperative! First, you married 'out', as the Jews say, then there's your activities in London".

"That is known?".

I watched her put on her hard hat. "Among our friends, yes. You can't keep that kind of thing quiet. Our kind form one big family. The news filters down to some very rural places. I had to slap a woman's face for saying you were the Tullia d'Aragona of Kent!".

"Anyone I know?" I asked, not without malice.

"No, no, not our set at all. Some middle class woman from over Bekesbourne way. I met her at a party and she had a little too much drink in her. Truculent, you know? I had to remonstrate with her".

I looked at her with love, as she gave her hat a pat. "And what does daddy say about me?".

"Nothing. What can he say? With him putting that blonde thing over her desk at lunch time". I chuckled. "I have to have the creature here sometimes for dinner. I yearn to tear her face, but have to endure her smug triumph instead. Its humiliating. But at least your father hasn't stepped down in class. Its a fact that she's descended in some way from the Lubomirska family".

"Yes, that would inhibit daddy" I murmured drily, rising from the bed. "Are you ready, mummy?".

She picked up her gloves and crop and said she was. She positively glowed, and why not? She was going to meet her lover. I asked her if she was excited. For answer she took my hand and placed it against her heart. That organ thumped strongly. "I'll tell you something, Joanne, my legs feel weak". I told her I wasn't surprised, as we walked down the stairs. I was a mite jealous, I confess. A servant held the front door open for us, and there we saw our horses, already saddled, being held by a girl groom. After we had mounted I saw Barbara, smartly dressed in jodphurs and the tailored jacket I had bought her for our morning rides. Her hands were clasped in admiration of her mistress. I smiled and asked her why she didn't saddle a horse and follow the hunt. She gurgled with delight and sped off to the stables.

My mother glanced sideways at me as we rode. "It seems to me that you are in love with that girl". I nodded. "I understand, darling. In my teens, in France before the war, I had those feelings for my own maid. On her half day off I waylaid her on her way to the village". She smiled faintly at the memory, which appeared fond. "I think she enjoyed it, our afternoon in the leaves. Anyway, I saw to it she didn't suffer. I slipped her a few hundred francs".

"And she couldn't refuse you, being the daughter of the chateau!".

"That's true. Jobs were not easy to come by in the village then. It was the chateau or nothing for peasant girls. But I insist she enjoyed it. I allowed her to busy her hands about my body, as I did hers. She said it was an honour. Well, I suppose it was. A pretty little thing, she was, just like your Barbara. Get her between the sheets, darling. She'll not refuse you. I can tell she loves you. Its in her eyes".

Any response I might have made was stilled by our arrival before the village pub. In those days there was no trouble with hunt saboteurs, anti-blood sport placards and so forth. Just the wealthy on their horses and local people watching (as I had been bred up to believe) their betters deferentially. We greeted the Master, then mixed with our friends.



Then I saw Tom and said "Wow!". Yes, mummy said with all the pride of possession well and truly in the toils of bodily hunger, you may well say that. She introduced me. His grip was strong and manly. I smiled at a well-turned compliment. We drank sherry together on horseback and I could see him drinking mummy in, anticipatorily; and he might well, I thought. After these amenities, I parted from them. I was not going to play gooseberry. Everyone else seemed to know they were an item, and aprt from casual greetings were left alone.

I looked around for faces I knew, saw my long-time friend, Pamela and waved. She pushed her horse over to me, mischief in her eyes. "Hello, Joanne" she gurgled, kissing me, "or may I call you Tullia!?".

"You may not, Pamela" I advised with mock-gravity, "and if anyone but you had said it, I would have knocked you from the saddle". She gurgled. "And how goes it with you?".

"Fine. I see you've met Tom. How d'you like him?".

"Seems like a man".

"Yes, you could say that. He's married, did you know?". I didn't. "But his wife doesn't care. Her own irons in the fire, I'm told. Seems everyone is at it".

"Are you?" I enquired playfully.

Pamela coloured. "Well, only with my fiance. Men expect a girl to open her legs, don't they? But you I admire, Joanne. I wanted to see you so I took a day off work. I wanted to ride with you once more before I got married. We're going to South Africa. Jimmy wants to get away from this Labour government!".

When the Hunt moved off, Pamela and I stayed together for some time, until after taking a particularly awkward hedge with a rivulet behind it, her girth broke. She screamed and fell. I drew rein and went back to see if she was hurt. She was too vocal to be hurt, but she was near tears from sheer frustration. I chased and recovered her mare and returning found her swearing. It seemed to help her. She forced a smile. "You'd better get on, Joanne. No reason why my bad luck should ruin your day. We'll meet again, won't we?". I said, of course we would, and invited her to luncheon on Sunday. She walked off, carrying her saddle and leading her horse, dejectedly, towards the village.

Actually, I was glad to see the back of her, though she was a good friend. I had mummy on my mind, but when I looked around neither she or Tom were in sight. Nor was anyone else much. I spurred to a rise in the ground and then I saw one rider. My Arab covered the distance in very short order. It was a lady, looking a bit dishevelled and a bit damp. I knew her well. "Yes, Joanne" she snapped, disagreeably, "I took a toss. Me, Diana the Huntress, as my husband calls me. And that bastard laughed as he saw me crawl out of the stream, and rode on. Wait until I get him home!".

"I laughed. "Oh, come on, Di. We're in the hunting field. Its everyone for themselves. You know that, ladies or gentlemen. By the way, Di - have you seen mummy?".

She gave a lewd laugh. "Where else would she be but in Park Wood". She pointed towards the horizon. "Tom was with her of course". I thanked her. "Love your horse, darling" she called after me, as I spurred away.

I asked myself why I had lost interest in the fox. It wasn't like me. After all, mummy was a grown woman, and gallant. She wanted Tom in her, just as I wanted Herman. But it is different if it is your mother. It doesn't seem right somehow. And Tom was a big man, and strong, and mummy was only a lady. I knew what could happen to men when satiating their lust. Male/female relationships are always violent and I feared for my lovely mother.

I entered the wood with care. It didn't take me long to glimpse them, through the trees, several hundred yards to my left. It was bizarre and to me quite horrible. They were both on horseback and mummy was being attacked in the saddle, inclined backward. I saw her crop drop from nerveless fingers and I knew she had fainted. He laughed as she lay limp in his arms; then my eyes widened as he plucked her out of the saddle and draped her over the horse in front of him. His strength chilled me. It was like a mediaeval Baron enforcing Droit de Seigneur. Shock rooted me to the spot. I ought to have charged in and rescued her; it is to my everlasting shame that I did not. But she had told me she wanted it, so indecision gripped me. In the event I did nothing. He rode off, and I didn't follow him. I was not anxious to see my own mother violated by her lover.

I gathered her horse, dismounting to recover her hat and crop. Then I got myself against a moss covered tree, and watched the horses crop the grass. I took a tube of fruit pastilles from my pocket and placed one in my mouth. I was affecting a sangfroid I didn't feel. Maybe mother liked that kind of handling, I thought. Some ladies do. Then I heard my mother's cries, three of them in succession. I started to sweat. I loved her, and what kind of daughter was I to stand by, holding a candle as it were. Then I heard her moans, and they were moans of happiness, that was certain. But I couldn't stand it.

I walked away along a path so that I wouldn't have to hear. Most of the wood was Canadian maple, a few oak and beech, but mostly maple. There were rhododendron bushes too, the blooms had long gone but I stroked the leaves to give me something to do. At this distance the cries were fainter; they might have been no more than a stricken animal far away. How long it went on I have no idea, about an hour is my guess. Then I heard a horse and through the trees I saw a big man riding away. I began to run back to where my brave mother lay.

When I found her, there was a trickle of blood from the side of her mouth. She lay still, head slightly turned to one side. I stopped, petrified. I thought she was dead, my gracious, aristocratic mother. It was appalling. That lasted about ten seconds. Then she groaned, moving feebly. I ran to her, throwing myself down, holding her in my arms, cradling her dark head, stroking her hair. "Mon Dieu!" she whispered, "that was a rough fuck". In my mother's mouth it sounded terrible.

Mummy had walked out an equestrian fashion plate. As it was said of another Catholic lady, centuries before, she was 'in most dishonest order' , or in a state of deshabille. I looked at her and wept. There was about her that delicious male smell I knew so well. "I thought you were dead" I sobbed. "How he has savaged you, the bastard".

"No, daughter, I am not dead. And stop crying. It was wonderful. I feel like a lady again".

"And he left you".

"Why not, he'd finished with me. For a man, it underlines his omnipotence. You know that well enough. Are you not Tullia?". She gave a small laugh.

Between us, she was restored to something like pristine condition. Once on her feet I propped her against a tree while I gave her the finishing touches that only a loving daughter can give. I brushed the leaves from her back, and picked a few dead leaves from her hair, still dark yet now with flecks of grey. I was zipping up her breeches when she kissed me full on the mouth. "We've always been girl friends, haven't we, Joanne? Thank God for it. I might have been laying there yet, but for you. From the day you were drawn from my belly, I have never been other than proud of you. And when I am gone, always keep the faith, as all ladies of our family have. I brought you up to be brave and gallant, you and Sally. No mother had finer daughters".



From mother to daughter this was quite a speech. Moved, I wept a little. This was the secret female world that men cannot enter, the knowledge that we are the sex and men just the gross satyrs who service us, manipulated and held in secret contempt. We are Woman, the Goddess, and while man has codified society in his own interests, every lady knows her position is far above her enemy - she is the Lifegiver. I thanked my mother, promising I would indeed keep the faith. She said simply: "I know it".

She touched her face and winced, then smiled: "Don't worry, darling. Its part of combat. Tom is a bit brutal, but then, aren't they all? I expect you've found that, Joanne. But it is fun, is it not?".

Sourly, I admitted it, marvelling at her hardihood, her warrior courage in the war that never ends. Then we faced her debilitation in the matter of mounting her horse; yet with the aid of a fallen tree and manoeuvring of her superb hunter, she made it. She paused in the act of putting on her hat to look down at the spot where she had fallen. "Remember it, Joanne. Between blackberry bush and old oak. Am I not a moss-trooper?".

"Mummy, I don't think that meaning is in the dictionary but I know what you mean! A new meaning is called for - a lady who makes acquaintance with the ground in her gallantry. I'll suggest it to the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language!".

We laughed about it, but when the estate had to be sold (as you shall hear) I exempted this wood from the sale. I expect it is overly sentimental of me but I did place a marker on the spot as a memory-jerker. She would have loved that.

I have spent time on what is a rather pedestrian adventure for a lady because tragedy immersed my family in its black waters within two weeks of the Hunt. Daddy had a heart attack at the dinner table and though rushed to Maidstone by ambulance he was found to be dead on arrival. We laid him in the new churchyard on the hill and at his head erected a stone bearing the usual details and his coat-of-arms. Our little Catholic church was crowded that day, but only three ladies in black stood by the graveside.

Mummy collapsed, and it was total - spiritual, mental and bodily disintegration. It seemed she lost the will to live and it puzzled me. Sally, who has become a fine woman now she has put her fears of Divine Vengeance behind her, had to explain it with customary brutality: "Jo, do I really have explain? Because as a family we are sexually active, it does not mean we do not love our husbands. We do our duty as wives. Sure we play around, we Carminhow ladies. But we love our husbands. It is true we cheat and betray our husbands; but they do the same to us. Mummy loved daddy and he her. Have you ever known when she wasn't here when he returned from the office, gracing the candlelit dinner table? The marriage wasn't a love match, true; it was wholly for dynastic and financial reasons, as you know well. But they respected each other and were indispensable to each other. They were a unity. Of course she grieves. But it troubles me".

It troubled me too, and the doctors. There was nothing wrong bodily; it was simply that mummy wanted to die, to lay beside the man she had come to love, slowly, imperceptively almost. He was her right arm and without him she had no wish to go on. So it was that within six months Sally and I stood again in the churchyard and lowered our beloved mother into the earth. At her head we placed an identical stone to that that stood at our father's head, though I insisted that it bore, not the Carminhow arms, but her own arms which she had borne when a maiden lady. I too bear them proudly, as does Sally, though we are, naturally, to bear those of Carminhow.entitled.

I have spent little time on these twin tragedies because it still causes me pain and I do not wish to dwell on the loss of my mother.

Sally and I returned from the graveside to weep. Again the church had been full, as is usual when a village notable is laid to rest. Even the local M.P was there, representing the Conservative Party for which we had worked so devotedly, and likewise people from the village organisations and charities for which our mother had worked without stint. Tom had rung me, asking permission to attend. My acknowledgement of his interest was grudging, but I noted he had crept in at the back that day during the Requiem Mass. He need not have been so furtive; he was not alone in church that day. It seemed to me that all the known swains had dropped what they were doing and attended. Had I been capable of being amused, that would have amused me; and moved me somewhat. But Sally and I were immersed in our grief, and that night Sally and I clung together as never before.

Mummy's personal Will had been revealed to us long before, the disposition of her property in France (left to her before the war by her mother, the Marquise), her jewellery, her clothes, a few bequests to servants, friends, charities and the like. There were also some instructions as to her coffining, which made us, and the undertakers raise their eyebrows. I had, frankly, forgotten the French property, three moderately large houses strung out along the silver Loire. Sally kept hers, at Chinon, for holiday purposes but John, living in the USA had no use for his and I bought it from him in due time, as an investment.

The jewellery came to we daughters "either to keep out of love or dispose of as they think fit". I refused to dispose and Sally shrugged at my folly. She chose some good items, leaving the rest to me. The wardrobe ran virtually the length of one wall and was packed with dresses for all occasions, trouser suits, casuals, furs, coats, rainwear, the whole sartorial needs of an elegant lady. In addition there were almost two hundred pairs of boots and shoes. I was three inches shorter than my mother and yet contrived, out of love and when wearing high heels, to adorn myself with her furs. I could never bring myself to sell my mother's clothes. Sally shook her head in despair of such sentimentality, sneering at my lesbian leanings. But it was not that, it was love.

Sally had the good taste not to raise it until after our period of mourning but soon afterwards she reminded me of the terms of our father's Will. I looked at her askance and said, a little wildly, that I would not sell the family home. She told me not to be a fool, pointed out it had only been bought just after the first World War and was not in any sense ancestral, and that I had no choice anyway under the terms of our father's Will. It had been mummy's jointure, but now..... I called her a hard-hearted bitch, which she took with a thin smile, giving me back as good as I sent, at which, being in a distressed state, I burst into tears. She raised her eyes to Heaven and poured me a brandy.

Of course, I knew she was right, but it hurt me. Sally was the hard one, the business head, but my accountant had already told me it would be worth our while to sell. "The proceeds would be a nice little earner" he'd said. Sally said: "You do have your palace in Mayfair" - she always called it a palace - "which you haven't used for over a year, and you're worth a million. You don't need this house. You're just being stupidly sentimental. Do grow up, Jo. I don't want it to go to some pop star either. Heard of the Location of Offices Bureau? City firms are always anxious to move out into the country".

This is what eventually happened. After the estate was sold, and all fees paid, John, Sally and I received one hundred thousand pounds each. But I kept Park Wood, as previously said. It earns nothing but I will never sell it this side of the grave.

Then one day my cup overflowed. Barbara came to me, saying it was now time for her to marry and leave me. Ever-ready tears sprang to my eyes. We now called each other by our first names. I had taken her into my bed just before my father died. She had first come to me, timidly, in



nightdress but had soon shed it, and lay with me nightly in unself-conscious nakedness. Her kisses were adorable and her love-making passionate. I asked her how she could possibly forego our sweet love. She cried out in distress: "Joanne, you know how it is for the female. We need babies and so we must marry. Men are necessary. But one day perhaps there will be sperm banks and we can relegate men to a subservient position".

I laughed bitterly: "Its a nice thought, Babs. But men are in the saddle and will never give up their power over us". So we clung to each other for a while, then I asked her what her fiance intended to do when he left the army. She told me he wanted to work in horticulture in some way. I told her to keep in touch after her marriage as I might be able to do something for them. I was selfish. I wanted her near me, babies or no babies. It took some years before I could achieve this, but I did.

The death of my parents had somehow effected a change in my psychology. I wanted no more men, except Herman. I had had enough. This period in my life had been torrid, too much so. I had dear friends I would still accommodate, because I could not be other than I was, but the heterosexual part of my life was dying, and I knew it. But Herman came and went from time to time. Herman was nice, Herman was comfortable, Herman was generous. He was also a committment.

Then, the very day I had put a tearful Barbara on the train to Northampton, I was curled up watching television, when the telephone rang. It was a voice from the past.

"My God, Fran" I began with some heat, "its been two years. It not fair.....".

"Joanne" she began tearfully, "don't nag me, there's a dear. I've been through Hell and out the other side". I blinked, and waited. "You'll recall telling me that woman's only business is love? I learned how right you were the hard way". This was going to be a long session. I switched off the BBC television news. "As you know, my husband's firm was huge, an octopus like the papers say. I was arrogant. I thought I could run it, like he had, tough, ruthless, driving through opposition like an express train. For a year I ran myself into the ground. I even slept at the office. I had to, I couldn't trust anybody. I had about four hours sleep a night. I drove myself, increasing the firm's grip. Success is a drug, money is a drug. But I always had your photograph on my desk. I told myself I was working for us, making our future life rich and happy. But what I really wanted was power".

"For God's sake, Fran.....".

"Yes, I know" she interrupted, tiredly. "I was a fool, I know that now. And I had enemies in the Boardroom, even my own nominees were conspiring behind my back. I had a girl in the typing pool who was in my pay. She told me they called me 'the bitch' and were out to destroy me. They objected to having a woman running things, even though my decisions were sound. But you know men don't like to be beaten by a woman, much less taking orders from a woman, the patriarchal swines. After a year of this I started kicking the wastepaper basket around the office, screaming. Even I knew I was ill. The doctors told me that if I had gone on another six months I would be dead. I was worth billions of francs and decided to sell".

"Saw it in the financial press here. The 'Madame Diversification' bit".

She seemed uninterested. "I was told I was a traitor to France, to the Government. Things got nasty. I was forced to hand over control to State nominees. I don't know what happened after that because I was in a clinic at Davos under sedation. But my lawyers sorted it out very well. The government bought the sensitive parts of the business, and the rest went to a Franco/German combine". She laughed bitterly. "From

being the most courted woman in Paris, I am now persona non grata. They shun me. I have to go to Paris sometimes, because they left me the luxury trade interests, you know, the rag trade. More appropriate to a female, they said".

"But you're rich?".

"Oh God, yes. Too much so. I feel guilty. No, I'm not going socialist. I'm MRP as you know. But it does seem immoral sometimes. I want someone to spend it on".

"That can be arranged".

"But they tell me you're one of the richest women in London now?".

"After the Queen" I laughed.

"That goes without saying. Anyway, I'm living in Nivernais now. I've got a clean bill of health, but I'm not doing too much. I ride in the morning, then I lay in the sun most of the time, with iced orange juice and a radio by my side. You'll enjoy that. Its what ladies are designed for, not doing the work of the world. Thats what men are made for, I see that now. So when are you coming over to share it with me?".

"That'll take some arranging, Fran. We'll discuss it seriously when we meet. I've no ties, though. I'll come over for a visit tomorrow if you like!". She said leave it to the weekend, give her time to get to Paris. I said that was fine. "But I've got to be back by the end of the month. I have a wedding to attend in Northamptonshire. My ex-maid. I promised".

"Ah yes" she trilled, "canteen of cutlery stuff, eh?".

"Something like that".

She asked me if I knew where Cathie was. I said truthfully that I didn't. The news dejected her I could hear but I said I'd let her know if I heard anything. "Look forward to seeing your place, darling. I don't know Nievre. I'll ring you when I've booked my flight".

Immediately I'd put the phone down I rang Sally. "I can't tell you how glad I am for you" Sally said. "I know you love each other. Its the best thing that could happen". There was genuine warmth in her words and I was touched. She heard my voice falter and she clucked her tongue. "For God's sake don't start blubbing, Jo. Go and enjoy. You going to up stakes here and live with her?". I said yes, eventually. "Well, rely on me for anything that you need done. I'm happy for you, Jo".

Well, Fran met me at Orly and we rushed into each other's arms, happy to be together. She had lost weight I could see, was now slim and elegant. I nodded approvingly. Her cheeks dimpled with pleasure. There were mutual compliments, she admiring my lightweight ensemble, me getting dreamy over the cut of her suit. "You'll have to beat the animals off with a club" she opined, as we reclined in the taxi en route to Paris.

In fact, one night I was bewailing the fact that I hadn't travelled on the Metro for years. "Let's do it then". It was on the platform of La Fourche that I was serenaded by a man who ought to have known better, considering his age. Fran just stood there, convulsed behind the Paris-Soir. At first startled, I pulled myself together and totally ignored him, or tried to. Such occurrences are not uncommon in France, where sex is not the dirty word it is in England.

I was really more interested in hearing about the manoir, so seated in Le Jardin du Vert Galant, with the Seine behind us, she told me about it. "We were driving to Nice to a business meeting when a succession of road obstructions caused us to be routed through many villages. We came to this tiny village, then round the bend in the road, away to the right, over some fields, I saw this house. It charmed me, why I don't know. I saw a lane and guessed the house was at the end. I prevailed on my dear spouse to investigate and we found this almost perfectly proportioned



house at some distance behind ornate gates, held together by a rusty chain and lock. Behind the house woods rose and it looked charming. But it was rundown and Jean-Paul sniffed. Still, I was defiant. "You're mad" he decided and turned away. But there was a battered real estate agent's board and I mentally made a note of it. While he was working in Nice, without telling him I rang the agent, saying that, subject to survey, I was interested. It was dirt cheap. There had been a marriage settlement, so I could afford it. Jean-Paul or no Jean-Paul I intended to have my dream-house".

"So you were bought like I was?".

"Certainly. Aren't we all? Anyway, we got back to Paris. He was very demanding in bed about that time" - her distaste could have been sliced and sold over the counter - "and so I wasn't unhappy when he announced he had to go to Tokio on business. He wanted me to go too; I declined. In retrospect I know he was wrong not to insist and myself equally wrong in putting my foot down. Later, one of the Board's wives took great pleasure in telling me that the first night there he went to bed with a call girl. I really do pity men, you know, cherie, slaves of their passions".

She waited while an old man shuffled past before continuing, while I felt shame at my activities in London, which I knew I would have to keep from her as long as I could.

"Well, he got back and had to drive south again. Again, I wouldn't go. Thank God I didn't! By nightfall he was dead" she said quietly. Then, almost as an afterthought: "He was a pig of course but that's how men are, aren't they?". I nodded, watching her face. "Now, I'm a hard bitch. So I'm not going to pretend I loved him, or he me. He got what he wanted in bed, and I had a luxurious lifestyle. And" she added defiantly, with a rush of honesty, "I'm even glad he's dead".

"It was an error, your marriage".

"That's true. Unsuited. But it was the money, you know that. You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, I wasn't. Anyway, on the day he died I got the surveyor's report. The structure was basically sound but needed a lot done to it - roof, floors, decorations, furnishings. Hadn't been lived in since 1945. Seemed the SS used it in the war, as an outpost of their Dijon base. Locals claimed it was haunted" she laughed. "You know what French peasants are. Great opposition locally".

"So you went ahead?"

"Of course".

She told me the rest over lunch at Ledoyen. "When I first went down to Nivernais, I got the keys from the agent in Nevers and drove out to the house. Included in the keys was not one for the chain on the gate. I fumed, then I remembered the gun in the car". She smiled. "Jean-Paul always told me to sell my life dearly in any kidnap attempt. He didn't propose to pay ransom! He always insisted I carry a handgun, so I did, and we kept one in the car. So I got out the Smith & Wesson M 39 and put two bullets into the lock. The chain rattled through the bars and and I pushed open the gate. Easy, eh?".

"I carry too". I flicked open my handbag and let her see the Astra.

"Very wise. A millionairess is fair game. But it was chill in the house, the floor covered with dust. I groaned. It would take a lot to put it right. But what the Hell! I'd got it dirt cheap. It came with the contents intact, but they'd all have to go. The drapes were damp and mouldy, upstairs and down. I wandered around, making plans. I spent all day there, the house, the stables, the outbuildings, and walking in the park in the sun, warming myself after the shuttered house".

"So there's land too?".

"Its an estate. Parkland, farms, cottages. I'll have to set up an Estate Office, with qualified staff. But as to the house, I couldn't live in it, as it was. So I stayed at the Metropole in Nevers, and drove out every day. The first thing I did was to get a firm of house cleaners from Bourges who went through the house from top to bottom. I've given them a contract to do it twice a year. Next was the surveyor. He was a good man, from Clermont Ferrand. There was rotten woodwork, floors to be renewed, although happily the marble entrance hall is fine. There was no electricity, so I had it laid on. There was water from a well but it was grossly polluted; so I had to get engineers in to prepare plans for both water supply and sewage disposal. Eventually an analysis proved the water to be proper, you know, free of pollution. The sewage disposal plant worked well. And this, mark you, before I had even started on decoration or furnishing".

"A big job". I felt sorry for her.

"Yes. And there were complications. Jean-Paul had a cousin, his only family. She hated me for no other reason that my parents had been Free French and she was the daughter of a wartime collaborator. I had to buy her off by paying for the education of her spotty-faced son on the understanding that neither he nor she would presume to come hammering on my gate. A cheap get-out for me".

"Seems reasonable", I murmured, knowing nothing could stop Francoise when in full spate.

"So from Nevers I was able to oversee the builders. The roof was being stripped and re-tiled, and knocking some attics into one. Then part of the stables had to be converted to garages. Not all because we all ride and we'll have horses. The builders hated the sight of me, for every morning I'd drive over and not budge till they knocked off for the day. But as you know, Joanne, you have to ride herd on artisans or they'll skimp the job, cut corners, and charge you for the privilege. When you are filthy rich, everyone is out to milk you". I nodded, feelingly. "Well gradually the house emerged as it was in its hey-day, gracious and lovely. So the next thing was the furnishers. Three elegant young women from Parisfrom Paris descended on me, complete with notebooks and hand recorders. I was dressed for riding and followed them around, feeling superfluous and certainly incongruous. False eyelashes fluttered at me, then they departed, promising to let me have their suggestion in writing within the week. They were as good as their word, so I rang them and told them to proceed. And they did". She paused long enough to moisten her mouth with wine, then ploughed on. "You should have seen it, Joanne. A veritable argosy of lorries and vans started to arrive, carpets, drapes, all the impedimenta of house furnishers. The noise of the hammers and portable radios drove me out into the park. Then I went to Paris on a buying spree. You know I like the Italian look but that wouldn't work here, so I settled for the Second Empire. Then at last it was ready, and believe me, and you may laugh if you wish, when I drove up the newly gravelled drive, I felt like a Comtesse out of the Ancient Regime! Thats what the villagers call me, in derision. Still, I feel good over it".

"Madame le Marquise at least" I smiled, remembering the Bach and Laverne popular song from pre-war days.

"At the very least. After all, darling, you know my descent! Our descent I should say. Some of the best houses of France and Savoy".

"That's true".

The following day we drove down to Nivernais and I fell head over heels in love with the house. I hugged it to my heart, as it were. This was the place I'd spend the rest of my life. With Fran. And Cathie too if we could find her. It was wonderful being rich, free and self-indulgent; and gay. The joys of the bedroom were exquisite. We'd always been close. "Smooth skin for ever!" she whispered. "Harry must have counted himself a lucky man".



"He never complained".

She laughed: "Why should he, for God's sake! He had it made".

"Poor Harry!" I sighed. "He was good to me".

"I know". She was tender. "You did better than I did. You can look back with affection, I can't. But our future life will be happy. This house is dedicated to Aphrodite. You've seen the statue in the entrance hall. But Cathie.....we've got to find her, Jo. We'll lay together, servicing her as she deserves to be serviced. She's wonderful and I was cruel and ungrateful to desert her like I did". I thought so but held my peace. "And for a man too. And his money-bags of course. God, but she must hate me in her heart".

"Never said so. But she still loves you".

"She has a generous heart. Find her for me, will you, Jo?".

"I'll try". Easier said than done, I thought. But sometimes Providence lends a hand.

I asked her to come to England for a holiday. She resisted but in the end she said she would in two weeks time. I told her I needed help anyway, and I'd like to show her my own house in London. That ensnared her, as I knew it would. Actually the move to France daunted me somewhat. I yearned to have Cathie's well-known organising ability at my beck.

Actually, though we didn't know it, Cathie was looking for us. I was ex-Directory so it wasn't easy to run me to earth. Nor was Sally, for Cathie had forgotten her married name. She even drove to Kent to make enquiries but the Catholic priest had died and replaced by a young fellow who knew nothing. Oh yes, Cathie tried hard with but little to show for it. She had more success with Francoise, as you shall hear in due time, but here her pride wouldn't let her make contact.

So I flew home. A good night's sleep then it was up early and a drive to Northamptonshire, to the valley of the Nene. I made it in time and Barbara's eyes, despite her pre-occupations, sparkled when she saw me. She was pretty as a picture in her white wedding dress and orange blossom. Her man was handsome, I have to admit, but I resented him taking my lover from me.

Then back to London. I had things to do. I hired a temporary maid from an agency, not a bit like Barbara. I rang Sally; I had long conversations with the Country Gentlemen's Association who handled my affairs, I did multifarious things in preparing for Fran's arrival. I saw Sheri Masters in Harrods, at a distance; I didn't speak - it was too dangerous to get involved with her again - but I think she saw me. I know she did. There was no recognition on her part. For a millisecond our eyes met and I saw animosity in hers; I passed on into the book department.

So on the appointed day I presented myself at Heathrow. I sat there awaiting her plane from Orly. I swear to you I was quite inoffensive, reading a magazine. Then this man came up and engaged me in conversation. A lady gets used to this. She is expected to be charmingly feminine; I was. I looked good, I knew that and his interest was understandable. I fenced with him, smiling. He wanted to know what I was doing; I told him truthfully. A holiday in the Cotswolds, that would be nice. I nodded, indicating that both Fran and I were looking forward to it. Is your cousin as lovely as you are, he wanted to know; I confess this question seduced me. I explained that Fran was French and looked a bit like Juliette Greco. I saw a movement in

his loins, and smiled inwardly at the ease with which a lady can manipulate the male. If she wants it, of course. Then Fran's plane was called and I asked to be excused. He expressed a great wish to miss my cousin. Well, why not, I said sweetly. I wanted to see her freeze him into a block of ice. He then asked for my telephone number. I gave him a totally fictitious Flaxman number, and he industriously scribbled it in his diary. He was happy. It was then I saw Fran. I waved and she responded, then blinked when she saw the man. I had not overrated Fran's glacial inclemency. All her aristocratic hauteur was unleashed on the man. He slunk away, tail between legs. Fran kissed me.

"Still as fine as ever" she trilled, "and still as successful as ever I see. How do you do it, Jo? Remember when we used to go hunting together after work? Like two Diana's after prey?".

"Shall I ever forget?". I smiled at the memory. "You were a hot number".

"So were you. I feared you as a competitor. We were both hot numbers in those days, had to fight our way home many evenings".

"It was fun" I conceded. "And now for the car".

I let her drive, she liked it, though somewhat out of practice driving on our side of the road. We stopped at Henley for lunch and wandered round the shops before making the easy run to Chipping Norton. It was over dinner that she raised the subject of Cathie yet again. I chose to be nasty. "You broke her heart" I murmured. She bit her lip and looked away. "She wanted to die and went abroad to get herself killed. For all I know, she's dead".

I saw her knuckles whiten as she gripped the table. "God, but you can be bitchy". Two tears welled in her eyes and I was appalled. She never cried in a public place, much too wellbred for that. So she went into it again, the self-justification bit. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Lets go to bed, Jo. I need you. Don't tell me its early, I know it is. But I want you".

The following morning she said she'd like to see Chastleton House, on account of its Catholic and Cavalier associations (Fran and I were naturally for the King!). She said: "Let's walk". I blinked. "Its not far" says she. No more it was.

Its funny how little things are remembered. I've always been terrified of dogs in the countryside. And there was a particularly ferocious Rottweiler along the lane to Chastleton. "It can't hurt us, cherie" I was told, "its behind wire". I wasn't consoled; I hurried past, regarding the snarling brute with great suspicion. She laughed. Within minutes the tables were turned. We turned in at the gate of the lovely old house and stood stock still. Fran signed herself, as well she might. There on the lawn were a lot of people, women and men, all in seventeenth century dress. The women wore black I recall, it was all very grand and awesome. Fran whispered hoarsely: "I've read of cases like this. Remember the Moberly and Jourdain case at Versailles? We've walked back in time. A parallel universe". She was serious. I took her hand.

"Ah, come on, Fran!". I laughed breathlessly. "They're making a film, I expect".

Her hand was cold and she was scared. "No, no. Look, Jo. They don't see us". It was true, they seemed to ignore us as we walked through them. I was decidedly uneasy. They looked solid, three-dimensional people yet they did indeed seem to take no notice of us. I too had read "The Adventure" and half-believed in what Fran believed.

We reached the front door and pushed it open. No sooner had we done so than we breathed again. We were in a wilderness of cables, cameras, spots and floods. I licked dry lips. "You see" I croaked, "I was right. They're making a film". In the corner three cameramen sat drinking out of plastic cups. They stared. Then a man with a clipboard hurried over.



"Hey, wot you doin' 'ere? The house is closed. We're making a film for the Beeb. The Duchess of Malfi". Fran explained there had been no notice up, making devastating use of her French accent. "Well, now you're 'ere you'd better have a quick look round. And mind you don't tread on anything. We start again in fifteen minutes".

He roared with laughter when Fran told him what we'd thought (I could have kicked her!) rolling off towards the camera crew. "You've got to 'ear this.....".

Feeling foolish we looked round quickly and were just leaving as the cast came trooping in, sparing us hardly a glance. The man regaled them with the story and I muttered to Fran in French: "Let's get out of here". But before we could do so, a grand lady approached us; she was dressed in black and I had no difficulty in recognising Eileen Atkins, the actress. She was amused we could tell. "I'm terribly sorry, darlings. Hope we didn't frighten you too much. We thought you were members of the unit, continuity or something. Sorry. Did you enjoy the house? It is nice, isn't it?". She was kind but naturally we made our escape with some speed. They locked the door behind us. I am sorry I did not see the finished product.

It was half an hour before we could laugh, then we became quite hysterical. But there was much else to do, to see. Its a lovely part of the country thereabouts, where Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire meet. We visited Upton House and Compton Wynyates (it was open to the public at that time) and on the last night we saw a play at Stratford, after tea at the bottom of Bridge Street; the Mulberry Tree I fancy. This has now gone I am told.

I flew back to France with Francoise, staying at the St.Cloud house. It was really an excuse to do shopping, before returning to England for business commitments. It was on Thursday it happened. Life is strange. If there really is a big computer in the sky, it had been programmed well. The day had dawned bright and clear.

Until the world grows dark around me, I'll remember walking towards the Galeries Lafayette with Fran by my side. We were holding hands and talking inconsequentially as one does; the warmth of her hand burned through my gloves. And then.....oh, and then a blonde vision came towards us. I remember my heart lurching as we stood there, staring unbelievingly. Fran's mouth was open, struggling with her emotions. Then we were in each other's arms, kissing, as Paris looked incuriously on.

"Cathie?" Fran whispered brokenly. "Is it.....is it you?"

"Fran.....Fran.....oh, my dear! And Joanne.....dearest one".

"God, but I've wanted you" Fran whimpered. "Lets get out of this crush". Cathiew was choked, despite her control. Then Fran turned to me, half eager, half apologetic. "Joanne, my dear.....would you mind, I mean can you possibly amuse yourself for the afternoon? Cathie and I.....well, you know how it is". She reached out her hands to me, pleading with her eyes. Of course I knew how it was. As if I could refuse my lover any damned thing.

"But of course, darling" I smiled. "When shall we meet up? Our cafe near the Arc de Triomphe at 5.0 p.m?".

"That'll be fine, cherie. I'm so sorry, Jo, but I've been longing for this day".

"Don't be silly. I can employ myself around the bookstalls".

Cathie squeezed my hand and then they walked away. I was alone. I saw them once in the afternoon, in the distance, walking hand in hand by the Seine. It was as well I could tell them where they'd been, for they certainly couldn't remember. We met up at the appointed hour at what we called 'our' cafe in the Champs d'Elysee; they were making love all the

while, mutely with look and smile. It was as it had been; well, almost. Fran was ashamed, that she had betrayed her loving protector, and that she had done it for a hated man. Cathie smiled tenderly: "Forget it. I loved you. But you seemed to love him" - the word seemed to scorch her lips - "and I wanted your happiness. Do you think I wasn't crucified by it? I still bear the scars". Her lips quivered and Fran put out her hand impulsively and covered the tightly gloved one. Love passed between them like an electric current, consoling, stimulating.

"God, but I was a bitch!". Fran plumbed the depths of self-abasement.

Softly Cathie chided her: "I said forget it. It was the power of sex. I understood. But maybe I should have fought harder. You remember when we laid together?". Fran remembered, her cheek against the ivory body, her mentor's strong hand holding her close. The memory was sweet and she nodded, not trusting herself to speak. "You said many things in your sleep. You called for Jean-Paul. You said if only.....if only I was rid of Cathie".

Fran's eyes locked with mine and I saw the pain. We are of the same blood and I understood. How could she have hurt this woman who loved her so devotedly? "You must have hated me" Fran whimpered, brokenly.

The denial came hot, vehement. "Hate you? Don't be silly. I was hurt, sure. I'm human. I thought I'd never see you again. When you walked out with your suitcase, slamming the door, I flipped. Me! There I was spread-eagled on the Axminster!". The laugh was tremulous. I could tell it still hurt. Fran's left hand mitred with mine under the table, remembering only too well, and seeking my support. "I really went off the rails after that. After I'd worked for Harry and he'd died, I flew out to Rio. Spent a month there, trying to forget you and spitting in the eyes of would-be Latin lovers. Then I wandered up into the U.S.A. I dropped cards to Jo, she was a dear friend too". Her tender smile at me turned my belly to water, as it always did. "None of this helped" she went on. "I still wanted you. I came back to England. I wandered around aimlessly, being a nuisance to my friends, bursting into tears at the least provocation. Then I had a nervous breakdown. I was in a rest home for a time. Then it was back to my old haunts in the States. I ended up in Vegas at the tables. I was rootless, yearning for you. I raised Hell a bit because thats a release for me. I made up to husbands just so I could scrap with the wives. I slugged several women who thought they could stand up to me. You know me. When I hit I hit hard, with joy. So the cops escorted me to the edge of their bailiwick and told me to head east and not come back". She laughed ruefully. "I guess I put a lot of work the way of dentists! Anyway I got back to New York and decided I'd settle my hash. So I went for a walk in Central Park after nightfall. Got myself mugged and raped, but not killed. More hospitalisation. Then I gathered my time was not yet and I came back to England and tried to settle down".

"Did you?".

"Not really. I got an occasional word of you, through contacts here. I heard about your husband, that he was a bastard to you. A wencher. I was sorry, yet glad. Proved what I told you was right". Fran nodded. "I had you under my eyelids still. Not long ago I came over, hired a car and drove south, making a detour past your place. A reporter I knew dug out your address for me. You did well for yourself. A lovely house". Her eyes twinkled. "I just loved the turrets. I stopped by the church and walked up the lane to your gates and used my binoculars. Just wanted to see you again". Her hand gripped Fran as if she was afraid she'd escape. "How I wanted a sight of you! And I did see you. You were playing with a dog, looking sad. I wanted to open the gates and run to you. But I'm a proud woman. So I drove on to Menton but, oh Hell! it was nothing without you. Then, in the casino I met someone.....".



She withdrew her hand, consulting the Omega on her wrist, turning back her glove with precise, deliberate movements, as if she was playing a part. Fran did not notice it, she was in a daze. Then suddenly words came out in a flood. "The house is empty now, except me, the dogs, the housekeeper. Let's take up where we left off. The erring child comes home, the prodigal daughter recovers her sanity".

Cathie flushed her pleasure, then the blue eyes wavered. "There are problems, my dear. There's Eve to think of. She's my puss. Like you were once". Fran took the blow between the eyes.

My cousin was jealous and Cathie knew it. "Eve?".

"Yes, Eve. She's with me, naturally. Been on a shopping spree. She's bookish, like Joanne. I asked her to meet me here. Funny how we always use this cafe. Great minds think alike I suppose. And she's late".

"What's she like?". Fran's voice had a slight edge. It made one think of Toledo steel. Cathie's eyes locked with hers, slightly mocking, sensing the burgeoning enmity and savouring it.

"You won't hit it off, I fear. That's the problem. She's cool, restrained, redhead, a real doll. All Roedean and Lady Margaret Hall. You know, top-drawer and highly conscious of it".

"Sounds a bitch".

"Aren't we all? She's an M.A and M.D and God knows what else".

"A doctor. Struck off, I suppose".

Cathie admitted it, surprised. "How did you know that?".

There was a Gallic shrug: "Would she be here otherwise?".

At that very moment a taxi screamed to a standstill our side of the Arc de Triomphe.

"That'll be her". Cathie turned her twinkling eyes to me. "You'll love her, Jo. Your brand of cut glass arrogance".

It was Eve for sure. We stared in reluctant admiration, Fran and I, she with a sinking heart. I stood with her, briefly. Sleek was the word. Well-endowed was another. Eve was pulchritudinous in a well-bred way. Loaded down with packages as she was, not a particle of hair was out of place, there was not a wrinkle in her well-groomed person. She walked like a princess and ran the gauntlet of several wolf-whistles. Breeding will out; contempt was writ all over her. Nastily, but sotto voce, Fran asked: "Do they teach deportment at Roedean?". Cathie chuckled.

The vision smiled at the blonde in sincere love, then turned her attention to the brunettes, coolly. One could hear her cash register mind pricing our clothes, probably to the last accurate franc. Then, satisfied that we were in her social circle, she inclined her red head graciously. "Friends?" she queried softly, managing to make it sound of only secondary importance, while she beckoned a waiter imperiously. Fran and I exchanged a glance of irritation. "Pernoud" she ordered. Then to Cathie she smiled: "Darling, I'm bushed. My dogs are barking too". The slang did not go well with her impeccable diction. She eased a small foot out of a black court, with a look of ineffable relief, while Fran regarded her with a distaste she did not attempt to disguise.

"This is Joanne". We kissed and she tossed me a pleasantry. Her perfume was delightful. Then our hands touched and I was lost and the lovely bitch knew it. Divide and conquer was the rule she lived by.

"I've heard so much about you, Joanne" she murmured huskily. "I'm sure we shall be shall be good friends". Fran told me later she watched me visibly disintegrate with disgust.

Cathie, relaxed in her chair, watched all the shades with malign pleasure. "This is Francoise. You'll recall me speaking about her".

These days I know Eve well. I know her to be a fighter of the reckless breed in which Scotland specialises. Her ancestors fought at Culloden 'on the right side' as she says, and before that in almost every battle you care to name. So she carried the fight into the enemy's camp with a vengeance. Her eyes flickered sideways. "Oh, really?". Again I could see Fran's blood boiling. It was so cool, so offhand as if she had been shown an interesting exhibit in a museum. "This is the part-timer you've told me about, Catherine? Good afternoon, madame. How was married life?".

It was very nasty and Fran went scarlet. I stared, horrified. Cathie was hugely tickled. Eve, sensing an enemy, and being a good warrior, had attacked without hesitation, establishing her status as an adversary to be respected.

Despite her amusement, Cathie was no fool. She had found Francoise again and had no intention of losing her; also, from experidnce she knew just how far Francoise could be pushed, and that was not far. My cousin has much TNT in her make-up. So Cathie stepped in hastily. "Eve" she crackled, "you are being rude. Francoise is my friend. You will apologise".

Eve raised one meticulously winged eyebrow. For two pins she would have refused, and Fran was on the edge of her seat, hoping she would. But Cathie was dominant; moreover the iciness in her voice was not lost on Eve. She knew a good billet when she had it. "Yes, you are right, Catherine" she murmured silkily. She smiled at Fran with charming radiance. "My apologies, madame. I am weary, hence my discourtesy. I am really very pleased to meet you and I am sure we shall be good friends". She extended a gloved hand graciously, which Fran took with patent reluctance, while Cathie nodded approval.

After this amende honourable, Eve relaxed in her chair, sipping her drink, looking angelic. Cathie asked her what she had purchased, eyeing a heap of packages on the side-walk. "This and that, mostly that. You'll see later. Got you a present too".

Cathie thanked her, then told her of Fran's offer. Eve was genuinely surprised. "That is very kind of madame, is it not, Catherine? I love French chateaux. All those turrets. Has your chateau turrets, madame?". Fran graveley explained that it wasn't a chateau really, just a manoir, but yes, it had two towers with what she described as turrets. It was meant to put Eve down but failed dismally. "I look forward to it very much. Are we taking up the offer, Catherine?".

"I'm thinking about it" came the tart reply, for Cathie detected the jagged edge beneath the veneer of charm. But she relaxed: "Might be an idea, don't you think?".

"Suits me" Eve gushed. "If madame is so kind.....".

"The name is Francoise. Or Fran".

Eve's smile was seraphic: "Mine is Eve. You'll do me a favour if you'll use it". Damn this bitch and her condescension.

"Alright, Eve". Fran's smile was forced and didn't reach her eyes. We all realised how thin the ice was. When Eve's eyes met Fran's, you could almost hear the clash of steel. From then on they were competitors for Cathie's favours; on bad days it was a state of war. On good days it was armed neutrality.

"Joanne will be joining us when she can".

That seemed popular. "Do it soon" Cathie pleaded, while Eve nodded with eagerness. It was so warm I reached out instinctively for her hand.

"I'll need help, Cathie. You're great at organising. Could you come over and help?".

"Try to stop me!". Then, turning to Fran: "Where are you and Joanne staying?".



"The house at St.Cloud". Eve smiled faintly; you could almost hear her computer feeding back the information that St.Cloud was a nice quarter. "Wish I could put you up, but I've let most of the house, keeping the top floor as a pied-a-terre. Thats what Joanne is going to do in London. But her place is more spacious. I've only got one bedroom".

Eve's sidelong glance told me that my stock had risen a hundred per cent in her eyes. We exchanged a smile.

"Doesn't matter, Fran. We're at the Meurice in the Rue de Rivoli".

So we got down to arranging tomorrow. Fran wanted me to see the Musee Ceramique at Sevres, knowing my interest in porcelain. "Well, we've never seen that" Cathie decided. "Lets meet for lunch, then go to Sevres. Then we can have a wild evening on the town". Eve gurgled her assent and so we did.

On the way back to St.Cloud, Fran was gloomy. "I'm going to have trouble with that Eve. She'll fight me all the way. I know her breed. She's a fighter". I laughed. "Its alright for you. You're back in England. I wish you were here. We could gang up on her. But it'll be me and her. Life is going to be a perpetual duel. And Cathie will love every minute of it. Every woman likes being fought over". She shook her head. "But that Eve! I'd say she was.....".

"Une ravaissante biche?".

"If you like". She gave a twisted smile. "Of course, you made a conquest. I hate you for changing sides so readily; it was disgusting to watch. You can't wait to get each other between the sheets. Talk about Madame Malleable".

"You condemn me for that?".

"Of course not. You need to be loved and have a great deal to give. But you'd only have to crook your finger. I guess thats what you intend?". When I nodded, she muttered: "Just as well. I can lay with Cathie and you can wallow in your Scottish bog".

"Give it time. You'll be friends one day".

"Doubt it".

"You sound scared of her".

"I am, I suppose".

"Wow!".

"I'm not joking".

"You're mad. You can handle anything. Remember that man at the airport?".

"Oh, a man!" she cried, disparaginly. "They're no problem. They're stupid, you know that. You were playing him for a sucker yourself. Men are a joke. But women are cruel to each other".

"You mean they put the boot in".

"Of course. Its war to the knife. So in God's name finish your business in England quickly and get here pronto. I need you to help me deal with that cow".

On the morrow Eve was on her best behaviour. No doubt Cathie had read her the riot act. We lunched at the San Francisco in the Rue Mirabeau and then drove out to Sevres. All through lunch Eve's foot fenced with mine under the table. I didn't stop her. I liked it. In the car it was plain Fran didn't want her in the front seat, so we sat in the back, our knees touching. We smiled at each other. Her glossy Titian hair entranced me and she knew it. Her hand closed over mine on the seat, playing her cards for all she was worth.

The evening found us beating up the cabarets around the Place Pigalle, which was amusing if nothing else, and we ended up at the Casino de Paris. Naturally, we drank too much, here, there and everywhere. Fran knew bars in the bowels of the earth which catered for the lesbian and gay men, which I found rather quaint.

By one o'clock I was having to prop my eyelids up with matchsticks. They laughed at me. "Nonsense, you're not tired. Soon get your second wind. Paris is just coming alive. The night is young, and we're nighthawks". She ordered more champagne, scattering money like confetti.

It was two o'clock when we dropped Cathie and Eve at their hotel. "Ring you tomorrow" Cathie carolled, supporting herself with the wall, while waiting for the night porter. I watched Eve stagger in the night air, before Fran shot the Mercedes forward. Befuddled, I peered out of the window, tried to get a location, failed and gave up the unequal contest. I was singing 'Volare' I was told. Then I must have dropped off, for the next thing I knew was Fran shaking me. How she'd got to St.Cloud with all the stuff she'd taken on board is still a mystery to me. But I have to admit she could handle her booze. She was flushed and her eyes shone; otherwise only her slurred diction indicated a skinful. We must have got to the bedroom somehow because when I awoke in the morning we were both in our evening clothes, sprawled over the bed. Fran was face down, one silver sheathed arm across my throat. I lifted it up and wriggled out from her embrace. I sat up, staring down at my black dress. My left tit had somehow escaped from its confines. Then I found I had a headache. I sank back with a groan.

Yet, when they saw me off at Orly, we were all as sober as judges and immaculately turned out. I felt a bit like death, but no matter. The farewells were emotional and womanly. I was jealous. They were going to Nivernais, I was going back to London to wrestle with business. Cathie and Eve mostly lived in hotels. It was easy for them to upstakes.

"Now don't forget, darling" Fran reminded, "I know a first class firm at Bourges who'll move you expeditiously. The boss was in Britain with De Gaulle, speaks English well, and will handle you himself. When you're ready I'll set the ball rolling".

"And I'll come over to help you" Cathie promised, "just give us a ring. I'm great at organising. With the stuff you'll want to bring, it'll be a packing case job. Just watch me with the hammer and nails! And I've got some stuff in store I'd like to get over. There's a large portrait in oils of Elizabeth, Empress of Austria, equestrian. Only a copy of course, but a good copy. The original is in Vienna. I got it in a poker game in New York. The guy thought he could take me easy, me being a lady and all". She chuckled. "He didn't know I'd worked the liners when a girl. When there were liners to work".

"That'll look great over the fireplace" Fran nodded. "You made a living gambling, Cathie?".

"Fair. I could make the pasteboards talk. All you need is a strong nerve and a lovely face. Act like a scatterbrained ninny and men'll queue up to be fleeced. As long as you don't push it too much, its a good life".

So I left them. It was heartrending, seeing Eve standing there, eyes luminous and not being able to take her in my arms. But I had to think about the future, how sweet it would be when we lay together. So I sat on my natural indolence, my womanly helplessness, and grappled with my problems.

It will seem strange, but my basic problem was books. It may not appear so, but I was a collector. Sex is only part of my life. I am a researcher by inclination and I had no intention of being separated from my fine personal library of five thousand books, many of them rare, including some incunabula. My father's seven thousand, which I had inherited, had to be left. But I was determined they should not be part of the let.



So I got the builders in, and had a false wall constructed in front of the library door, and a spiral staircase constructed giving access to it from the upper part of the house, which was dedicated to my own purposes. There were three bedrooms there, a sitting room, bathroom and usual offices as estate agents say.

Then there were the packing cases. The entrance hall became desperately unattractive, with just enough room to allow access to the staircase. Books were stored lovingly, as were my mother's clothes, in packing cases, together with other treasured belongings. Other things were the merest trivia - the change of address cards, arranging that the housekeeper's salary should be paid into her account monthly, a journey to the print shop to get a box of large envelopes printed with my name and address so that mail could be sent on weekly, and so forth. The necessary forms for the customs I left to my agents.

Then, in the middle of all this, Herman rang and like every mistress since the beginning of the world, I had to drop what I was doing, make myself beautiful for him and willingly submit to his will. He nearly had a fit when he saw the packaging cases. He thought for a moment he was going to lose me. I consoled him. "Did you not say you often had to go to Strasbourg? Well, thats not far from the Yonne valley".

"Could come to Dijon. I like Dijon". I said that was even better.

Once he'd gone I rang Cathie. "The time is now I fancy" I cried eagerly down the phone. "I'm on my way" says she crisply, "I'll bring the station wagon. Expect me Friday, unless the car ferry goes on strike!". I took the train from Charing Cross to Dover docks to meet her, and we drove to London together. She wanted to visit old haunts again, so we did a cross-country safari, re-living our past life but got to Mayfair around dusk.

It was a week before the men from Bourges turned up, by which time we had nailed down the packing cases. We left Cathie's portrait of the Empress of Austria till last, cased against damage. Then they departed after a night at a bed and breakfast place in Battersea, which they used usually on English jobs.

That evening Cathie saw the faint mark on the carpet where Dabrowska had died. I told her the whole sorry story, while we sipped sherry in the fading light. I thought she'd be shocked, but I'd forgotten the nature of the woman I was dealing with. She laughed: "Welcome to the club, Jo!".

"You mean.....".

"Sure. I told you I worked as a private eye in California for a time, didn't I? Well, I was trailing this hood, and he caught on. It was evening, just like this. He decided to put me out of business and damned near did. It was he who shot me. As I was going down though I drilled him. He looked mighty surprised as he grabbed his belly. I crawled away. He didn't".

"Christ!".

"So both of us nearly died. Well, thats how the cookie crumbles. And you must not worry about it. You did what you had to do, like I did". She started to laugh. "But that business up in Bucks was funny. Never knew that went on in London".

"You'd be surprised what goes on in London" I remarked drily.

"I guess so. And I thought you'd lived a sheltered life! But I'm proud of you. So will the others be".

"You reckon I should tell them?".

"Why not? We're women of the world. I mean, we're not nuns, are we?".

That was for sure.

It was amazing what you could pack into the station wagon. Cathie had glanced through my record collection and had suddenly become agitated: "You're not going to leave these, are you? Hell, its the best collection of operetta I've seen". I was surprised, though I knew that she loved dreivierteltakt.

"We got room?".

"We'll find room". And we did.

Then the morning came when we had to depart. The previous day we'd gone around the West End with some nostalgia. Apart from our annual visits, Paris was to be our city. We would even, in time, become French citizens. But we were grown women, and shouldn't be sad about leaving bricks and mortar. But we were. Then to cap it all, just outside the Royal Academy I saw Sheri Masters. I grabbed Cathie's arm, and pushed her into Fortnum & Mason. "So that's the Masters woman!".

We left the day after our shopping spree, as said. It was coolish. So I wore my white leather suit that I loved so much. I knew, too, it would turn Cathie on. It did. When she saw me swanning down the elliptical staircase booted and cloaked, she exploded: "In the name of God have pity! I'm driving. How do you think I'm going to keep my eyes on the road and my hands off you?!".

I laughed merrily. "But think what it'll do for Eve when she sees me".

"Bugar Eve!" she snapped, most inaptly. She smelled me rapturously. "God but I do love leather".

I tried not to look about me as we drove through London. The pain was exquisite. It was driven from my head when I remembered my firearms. I was carrying my Centennial under my skirt and Cathie had the Astra in a Berns Martin rig under her clothes in the small of her back. I asked myself what we would do if they strip-searched us. Cathie said they wouldn't and they didn't. She told me not to look guilty. "The packing cases are at the manoir by now" she said cheerily.

It was not until we were on the boat, on deck that she suggested we might stay overnight at Calais. While we stood talking and minding our business, a man ambled up and tried to make a pass at me. Tiredly Cathie snapped: "Sonny, run along, there's a good lad. We're old enough to be your mother". We gave him our backs and, wonder of wonders, he went, muttering obscenities. He couldn't have been thirty. "That's what a woman is up against" Cathie grumbled, "every man wants some bay to drop anchor in". I said I'd love to stay at Calais overnight.

We stopped at the Richelieu which had a double room. The pressure was off hotels now, though we had drawn a blank at four others. Then we had an adventure, typical of my life in France. It was all my fault. I just had to see the Tour Guet, 13th century, and the ruins of Notre Dame. We were heading back towards the Rue Royale when two men stepped out of a doorway and blocked our path. "Its that suit" Cathie sighed, "now see what you've got us into. You're a walking prick-tease".

I was frightened, rooted to the spot. Neither of us had time to jerk a life preserver. One pushed me against a wall and his hand went on a voyage of discovery. I brought my knee up hard. He grunted and staggered back. At this moment I saw the other man swing wildly at Cathie, who ducked, then threw him with ease, and he slithered along the pavement on his face. The other man came forward and I kicked him where it hurt. He went down, bawling, holding his balls in pain. Cathie grabbed me: "Bravo, kitten. But this is no place for you and me". We ran as fast as our heels would allow and did not stop until we turned into the Rue Royale.

"When we get home prepare yourself for long, sweaty hours on the mat" I was told. "You did well, but a lady has got to be armed at all points. No male bastard is going to rape me, or you for that matter. Mark me now, Josephine-Anne".



I had to have a drink because I was trembling. We went into the bar and ordered Calvados. I knew Cathie wanted to get upstairs and it was amusing to tease her. So I sipped slowly, savouring my power over her. And having acquitted myself reasonably well in her eyes, I was quite deplorably smug - until I thought how it could easily have gone the other way. She took my hand.

In the morning we left as early as possible. Cathie wanted to avoid Arras and Amiens, so we drove south to Abbeville and Beauvais, then turned east to Compiegne and Soissons; from there south to Chateua Thierry, Momtmirail, Sezanne and Troyes. We stopped at Soissons and had a snack before getting back on the road again.

"Not the direct route" I was told, "but I don't know this part of France too well. And I couldn't face Paris". What did I care? I was coming home. Anyway, at Troyes we were nearly in home territory. As we turned south-west to Auxerre, "Last lap" she sighed with obvious relief.

Then we came to Vezelay and I insisted we stopped for a drink, for I could see she was tired. So we sat in the sun and sipped cidre. She would take nothing stronger. "Glad to be home?". I nodded happily, looking around. "Well, we've plenty of time. Let's stretch our legs. I'm stiff as a board". I too needed a walk after being cooped up for so long. Then back to the car.

As we turned into the drive, she leaned on the horn like a Parisian taxi driver. This brought everybody running, and great was the welcome. Fran's arms were outstretched. Eve had to wait her turn.

"So here you are" Fran murmured, "home at last, Jo".

"Home at last".

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